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EASTRIDGE ACADEMY: SCHOOL FOR ADVENTURERS

BY

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Prologue

Explain why you would be a strong candidate for attending Eastridge Academy, School for Adventurers, in 500 words or less.

“Hey, Farmington. You stupid farmboy, what have you got there?”

Fell Farmington gulped and quickly tried to hide the application for *Eastridge Academy: School for Adventurers*. But he wasn't fast enough. When he looked up, Lanks, along with Mannir and Yan, stood watching him.

Of all the local boys, this group was the most trouble. Lanks was bonded to the town's blacksmith, and after hours of hammering away at metalwork each day, he was the strongest boy around. Yan, even luckier, was bonded to a paid fighter, so he spent his days learning different forms of combat. Mannir was free, with parents wealthy enough to support him until he learned the trade of his choice. Even though he was a few years younger than Lanks and Yan, they let him tag along because, more often than not, he had some spare coins he was willing to share.

“I said, what've you got there?” Lanks repeated, stepping menacingly close to Fell.

“Nothin', Lanks.”

But Lanks had already seen. His expression said that much. He glared at Fell with obvious resentment. A full two years older, Lanks had applied to Eastridge Academy back when he had turned fifteen and had been soundly rejected. “Think you're better than us, Farmington? Think you've got something we don't?”

“No. It isn't, it isn't like that,” Fell muttered, but Lanks had already snatched the application out of his hand.

“How in Ren’s name did you manage to scrape together seven silvers, Farmington?”

Mannir jeered. “Must’ve stopped eating for the past two or three years.”

“I don’t waste my coin on games or girls,” Fell snapped, making a lunge for the application.

Actually, it *had* taken Fell three years of saving to pull together the money to apply. In those three years, he had thought only of training, learning, and, unavoidably, baling hay. All of that had been for this piece of parchment that Mannir now held.

Lanks laughed scornfully. “But what could you possibly offer Eastridge other than a few bales of hay?”

“Let’s see,” Mannir said, opening the application. “Apparently dedication and hard work and—”

Fell launched himself at Mannir, hitting him hard in the chest. Fell's only thought was saving the application. He knocked it out of Mannir’s hand, and it fell to the grass a few feet away as the two boys tumbled together on the ground, both swinging wildly.

Instantly, Yan was on top of Fell. He grabbed Fell by his patched tunic and threw him off of Mannir. Fell scrambled for the application, grabbing it and running as fast as he could back to the farm.

Yan caught up with him just as he made it to the cow pen. He shoved him forward, sending him tumbling to the ground. Fell rolled under the fence to the cow pen with Yan following him, pummeling him with kicks to his ribs and sides. Fell tried to roll away, but by then the others had caught up to him. Lanks grabbed him, throwing him back down in the dirt and holding him in place.

“All that for this?” Mannir asked, picking up the application and rubbing his bruised jaw where Fell had landed a solid punch.

“Why don’t you let us save you the trouble of waiting a few months for the rejection?” Yan grabbed the application and held it between his fingers, ready to rip it in half.

Fell struggled against Lanks, but the older boy was too strong. “Let go, Lanks!” he shouted. “I need that!”

“Too bad,” Lanks said, pushing Fell harder into the ground. “It looks like you’ll have to stay here for the rest of your—”

Lanks never finished the sentence. Fell felt Lanks release him and turned to see what had happened.

The herd of cows pressed around the unfamiliar boys who had entered their pen, lowing angrily. The three boys backed up as the herd shuffled closer, hooves stamping the dirt near their bare feet.

Mannir dropped the application as one of the cows nipped at him. The boys clambered back under the fence.

“Maybe old Bessie should apply to Eastridge. That cow’s got a better chance than you,” Lanks sneered as they left.

Fell sighed, brushing himself off. Bessie, a light brown cow spotted all over the chest and face with off-white markings, lowered her head down to nibble the grass near him. He rested the palm of his hand against the cow’s neck, letting the throbbing of his bruised sides subside before he moved.

“Thanks, Bessie. Good girl.” He sighed again. “But, I’ve told you... I don’t need a cow helping me fight bullies.”

With her big soft nose, Bessie nudged the envelope.

“You’re right, girl. Better finish this.”

Explain why you would be a strong candidate for attending Eastridge Academy, School for Adventurers, in 500 words or less.

Fell crossed out the answer he had started and stared at the blank space. How could they ask him why he would be a benefit rather than an embarrassment to the school he had idealized since he was old enough to understand what it was? Eastridge Academy was where the best soldiers and Warriors of the realm trained. Fell wasn’t old enough yet to fight in the war with Serath, but when that day came, Fell wanted to be ready.

But Fell was far from being a Warrior. He had seen a few soldiers and adventurers traveling across the countryside, and he couldn’t imagine ever measuring up to any of them. What Lanks, Yan, and Mannir had said crowded his mind, along with his master’s criticisms. Bumbling fool, country bumpkin, clumsy clod. The worst part was that Fell couldn’t make a strong case for not deserving any of these titles.

Fell put his head down on the soft, cool grass. He closed his eyes and tried to block out the memory of what had just happened. But he couldn’t. He was fit for nothing but baling hay, and that’s what he would do, doubtless, until he died.

But no, something in him rebelled against that idea, something that had been rebelling his whole life. There were the hours of extra work spent poring over books to keep up with the classes he couldn’t attend because of one harvest or another, the fierce early morning training

sessions where he battered his body in mock fights and drills, and of course, the actual beatings, whether administered by his master or the local boys like Lanks.

Most kids here, like Fell, were bonded. However, Fell was the only boy bonded to such a pointless task. While other boys learned blacksmithing or butchering or even hunting, Fell learned to bale hay. Nothing more. He had mastered this task as far as he could tell, within the first few weeks, but he had three years left of his bond—until he was eighteen and released to his own devices.

However, there existed one loophole. Should a bonded laborer be accepted to a major university, it was held that the bonded would be released on the condition of sending wages back to his master for the work lost during the school year. Even had this not been the case, Eastridge would still have been Fell's destination, one way or another.

Now, at nearly fifteen, Fell was finally old enough to apply. Everything had led up to this... And while his thoughts filled with his failures and his humble prospects, he found a way to write about his determination, his fierceness, and his resilience.

But when it came time for him to inscribe his name at the top of the application, he couldn't bring himself to do it. Fell the farm boy, Fell the hayseed, Fell the clumsy clod. Fell fell down again. Fell who had just gotten beaten *again* by Lanks and Yan. Surely Eastridge Academy would see through his bold words and know him for the weakling that he was just by this cursed name. But it had to be filled.

With a sudden bold movement of his hand, Fell struck out in brash strokes, quickly filling the space. But not with his own name. In the space that was given, he took the name *Fallan*.

Fell took it in his hands and sealed it in the official envelope. Then he slowly climbed to his feet and began the walk into town to post it. Bessie started to follow him, but Fell shook his

head and pointed homeward. This, at least, he would do by himself. The walk was several miles, but to Fell, it felt all too short. His body still aching from the bruises and his pride more than stinging from the timely rescue by his master's best milking cow, Fell was feeling less and less like an adventurer with every step.

By the time he had reached the post master, he had nearly convinced himself that Lanks and his crew were right, that he might as well save himself the months of waiting and rejection, not to mention the seven silvers. He held the application in his hands, then shook his head. This was his dream. He wasn't about to give it up.

He looked at the application one last time before delivering it up, letting it fall into the drop box for the evening post. He had put all of his heart, all of his hopes into that envelope, and now his task was to painstakingly wait for a reply.

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Wraith Ravin was an hour into his interview, and although he'd studied for hours and carefully planned out a variety of his answers, it had only taken five minutes for him to give up his hopes of predicting what the panel of Eastridge professors would ask him.

There was only one question that he had answered with any certainty, and that was when Professor Aisling, the Head of the Cleric Department, had asked him his name.

“Wraith Ravin. But please, call me ‘Rai’.” He had dropped the ending of his name, drawing out the ‘ay’ sound.

After that, it had all been a blur.

Aisling had asked him questions ranging from practical applications to wildly improbable scenarios like being trapped at the top of a mountain pass with two wounded teammates and he

had to pick one to heal. Or if he were in the middle of a battle with his team against over a dozen trained and armed soldiers how, as a Cleric, would he assist?

Then she took a completely different turn, asking him to imagine himself as a traveling Cleric who had come across a town being ravaged by a mysterious illness.

“Suppose the children had been afflicted with a high fever for several days. Their parents are frantic for you to do anything to bring down their temperatures. What rune would you use?”

Rai saw the trap immediately and grinned. “Well, I could use the Cold Rune, but that would bring the temperature down to freezing, which might be far worse for the kids than the fever.”

Aisling raised an eyebrow. “The question, Rai, was what you *would* use.”

“The Probe Rune would tell me the cause of the illness. Or a Scry Rune, if I had access to a more skillful mage than I.”

“And if it was a mage-fever?”

That made Rai stumble over his next words. Nowhere in all of Easden taught that sort of dark magic.

“There are several ways—the simplest, of course, being to hunt down and kill the spell-caster—”

This drew an appreciative chuckle from the Head of the Warrior Department but a glare from Aisling.

“Less drastically, ruensbane has been known to dampen magical effects enough so that the body’s own defenses can overcome it,” Rai paused, not sure if he should say the last thing that he was thinking. “Then there’s always the Unravel Rune. It’s said that, if such a rune really exists, it can get inside a spell and un-work it.”

Aisling nodded and made notes on her paper. Rai tried to follow the strokes of her quill, but it was impossible to tell what she was writing. He hoped they wouldn't dock him for mentioning a myth. She flipped through the pages of his application for a few moments, then nodded to the rest of the department heads.

"His knowledge is satisfactory for the Cleric program," she said at last.

Rai almost let out a sigh of relief, but he knew it was much too early to celebrate. The Cleric program was only half of what he was applying for.

A masked figure that Rai hadn't noticed in the shadows before leaned forward.

"Wraith Ravin," Nianzu said, whose voice was surprisingly feminine despite the ferocious mask, "please empty the contents of your pockets onto the table in front of you."

Baffled, Rai laid out the bits of paper and one of the many daggers he carried with him. The rest of the Thief interview was just as perplexing. He was blindfolded and asked about the entrances and exits to the room he was standing in. He was given a code, and Nianzu timed him while he attempted to decode it. Then he was asked to demonstrate how he would melt into the shadows of the room. Just when he thought he was prepared for anything, she caught him off guard once more with a simple question.

"Just one last thing," she said. "Wraith Ravin, what interest does a noble of the Fourth House have in the Thief major? Let's not pretend that Thieving is a respectable trade in the circles you run in."

Rai Ravin was momentarily floored by the question. It was commonly held that the Thief major was less than reputable, but he had expected a Thief professor to be the last person to admit it.

He paused for a moment, unsure of what to say. However, he let his natural way with words quickly take over.

“While the occupation itself is somewhat controversial, Eastridge is one of the most respected institutions in the realm. Surely, the skills that we would learn in the Thief major can be put to nobler uses than what first comes to mind.”

“That’s a pretty answer,” Nianzu said, before Rai could feel the usual sense of satisfaction at a speech well-given. “But I’m not asking for the answer you’d give your parents. I want the answer you give yourself.”

Rai opened his mouth, a polished sentence ready, but Nianzu raised her hand, cutting him off.

“Speak, don’t think.”

This was it. Rai could tell. His answer right now would determine whether or not he got into Eastridge. How could this crazy woman ask him *not* to think when his future hung in the balance? But if that was the only way...

“I want to break the rules,” he said, feeling vulnerable about telling the truth.

Don’t think.

“All my life, I’ve followed my father’s rules. I’ve watched obedience ruin the lives of those I love, and I refuse to let it happen to me. I want to be a Cleric so that I can help others, but I want to become a Thief so I can help myself,” Rai stopped, uncertain.

Nianzu nodded, stacking the papers she was holding. “This concludes the question-and-answer portion of this interview. Now for the performance assessment.”

“Performance?” Rai asked warily.

“You’re applying to be a Thief,” Nianzu said very seriously. “It wouldn’t be much of an interview if you didn’t steal something.”

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The coin was thick, copper, and inscribed with a number on one side and a crow on the other. It was small enough to fit in the palm of Averi’s hand, and she had absolutely no idea what to do with it.

She turned it over in her fingers, then replaced it in the pocket of her gown. She rose from her seat on the cushioned chair and took a few steps out of the alcove she had been waiting in. Resting her hand on one of the bookcases, she looked around at the other candidates to see if they had figured anything out.

All around the room, the applicants mingled, some discussing the coins, others comparing the particulars of their interviews. Most of them seemed to think the professors were done evaluating them, but Averi had a feeling that these coins meant it wasn’t over yet.

Though what the professors had planned next, Averi had no idea. After three hours of grueling examination, which had ranged from casting a series of advanced runes to describing the most efficient way to deal with an attack from behind, Averi wasn’t in much of a condition to think. After the examination, they told her she had passed that portion of the interviews and had simply handed her this coin. The only explanation they had given her was to hold onto it.

Then they had released her and fifty other candidates into the school’s library.

Averi frowned. She had to figure it out. If she weren’t accepted, she’d be sent back to the University of Arcane Magics, where she’d learn little more than flower arranging and magical parlor tricks.

Averi was sure she was missing something. Why had they given her the coin? Just to hold it? Nothing about the interviews for Eastridge Academy: School for Adventurers could be this straightforward.

Or easy.

No, there had to be some sort of trick, Averi thought. She reached down into her pocket for her coin, but instead of copper, her hand fumbled against something that felt suspiciously like fingers.

Stifling a gasp, she grabbed the hand in her pocket and spun around to face its owner.

At first, she couldn't see him clearly; his face seemed to melt into the shadows, and her eyes slid over him without finding anything to hold on to.

“You can drop the Hide Rune,” Averi said. “I’ve already seen you, and I’m not letting go.”

In an instant, she saw the magic flicker and disappear, and she was looking up at a brown-haired boy. The first thing she noticed was his smile. Despite the situation, it was nearly a grin, lopsided, like he was sharing a private joke with her.

“Well, this is awkward,” he said.

“What were you trying to do exactly?” she asked, releasing him to check her pocket for her coin.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Don’t worry, I didn’t get it. Your token’s safe.”

“My token?”

“Your place at Eastridge. The coin,” he explained. “Didn’t you figure it out? Warriors, Mages, and Clerics earn their way in at Eastridge on skill. But if you’re a Thief, you have to steal your place from someone else.”

“That’s terrible,” Averi said.

“It makes a kind of sense,” he said indifferently. “You wouldn’t be much of an adventurer if you let your guard down.”

“And what, you thought I would be an easy target?”

He gave an unapologetic shrug. “A Princess of Easden? I didn’t exactly think you were used to carrying around pocket change.”

Averi winced at the title. “What gave me away? I thought I looked inconspicuous,” she said, gesturing to the simple light brown gown she wore.

“You mean, aside from the platinum blonde hair and the amber eyes deep enough to drown in?” he asked with a chuckle to show he was only joking. “To be honest, I recognized you from the last time I was in the Royal City.”

“Oh,” Averi said, looking him over and trying to place him. From his clothes, he might be one of the lower nobility, and in that case, she might have known his family. But before she could ask, the clock began to chime the hour.

“Unfortunately, Princess,” he said, glancing at the clock, “since you’ve been most unobliging with your token, I really must be going.”

She didn’t see him write out the rune, but his face shifted under her gaze, and he darted away before she could stop him. She tried to see where he went, but in the dimly lit room, it was impossible to tell.

Averi closed her hand around her coin, daring to feel hopeful. She had made it past the final test. She was going to attend Eastridge Academy. She looked around the room, realizing that of the candidates here, many would be her future classmates.

Thinking of her thief, she frowned. Though he had tried to steal her spot, she couldn't help being charmed by him. To her surprise, she unabashedly found herself hoping he would have better luck with his next target... and that she would someday see him at Eastridge.

At the conclusion of the test, the applicants were all released, with the promise that their results would be sent to them shortly. Averi left the Library and found her parents waiting for her in an ornate coach.

"So?" her mother asked. "How was it?"

"I think it went well," Averi said hesitantly as she climbed into the carriage.

Her mother sighed fretfully. Only after much convincing had she begrudgingly agreed that if Averi were accepted at Eastridge, she would be allowed to attend. Averi looked out the window as the carriage began to move, clattering down the road back to the Royal Palace. Her father drew her mother near, and Averi focused on the passing scenery to give them some privacy. Her father always knew how to reassure her mother.

"I just don't like it," Averi's mother muttered.

Her father laughed, taking her mother's hand. "There's nothing to be done now, Aciana. Averi always would prefer the company of her brothers and cousins when they rambled about the palace..." He leaned in to whisper to Averi's mother, but Averi could still hear him saying, "I don't think she ever forgave herself for not being able to go with them when they went off to fight in the war. And she's never forgotten what happened to her brother."

"When she's old enough, I doubt anything short of death will keep her from fighting. And there's precious little good that flower arranging will do her in that case," Averi's mother said with a sigh.

And it was true.

Averi *would* get in. She had to.

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Wisteria was furious. She heard shouting coming from behind the heavy wooden doors, but she barely spared it a passing thought as she flung them open.

“You have turned Ling Monastery into a fortress,” the soldier was saying tersely. “What I am asking you is why.”

Wisteria was disappointed when the long-time Keeper of the Ling Monastery, Yui Wei Ling, did not blink when the wooden door to her office burst open with a loud ‘thud’.

The Initiate who guarded Yui Wei’s door stumbled in after Wisteria, stammering protests that Wisteria ignored as she strode heavily into the room, fury in bright, hazel eyes and anger contorting her features.

Yui Wei eyed Wisteria. “It’s a pity you’re so transparently temperamental.”

Wisteria glowered at her mother.

“It’s going to give you wrinkles when you’re older.” Yui Wei folded the stack of messages she was reading and dismissed the Initiate with a nod. “My apologies for the interruption. Dealing with my daughter should only take a moment,” she said to the soldier, and to her daughter, “Yes, Wisteria?”

“Don’t pretend that you’ve no idea why I’m here!” Wisteria didn’t so much as glance at her mother’s visitor as she slammed a piece of thin parchment paper onto the table. Yui Wei took it gingerly.

The letter read:

Dear Raven (Formerly Wisteria Ling),

After reviewing your application, we are pleased to offer you a place at Eastridge Academy: School for Adventurers, in the Mage and Cleric majors, under which you applied. Please note that all official materials henceforth will reference you by your new name.

Sincerely,

Veraniel Sansdarth

Headmistress

Yui Wei watched as her daughter plucked the letter out from her hands and threw it into the fire in the hearth. The letter exploded, and the magic that was infused into the paper to keep it from weathering dissolved into sprays of purple and green. The paper curled and burned.

“You have such a flare for dramatics,” Yui Wei observed with a calm that Wisteria both despised and envied.

“Dramatic? I guess changing my name to Raven was subtle?”

“It’s common for students at Eastridge to take a new name when they begin training there.”

Wisteria looked down. “But I like my name.”

“You haven’t earned the right to use the monastery’s name outside these walls,” Yui Wei said.

“But Raven?” Wisteria asked. “You could’ve at least asked me.”

“I’ve been told it’s the most common name students take at Eastridge. I thought it would help you blend in.”

“I hate it,” Wisteria said.

“You’re being needlessly rebellious,” Yui Wei said.

“Likely because of your tendency to relentlessly control my life.”

Yui Wei’s mouth twitched. “Eastridge is a fine school. Though if I’m not mistaken, Orientation begins tomorrow. Shouldn’t your carriage be halfway there by now?”

“I’m not going.”

“You’re not?” Her mother had the gall to look surprised. The knot in Wisteria’s stomach tightened.

“Why are you sending me to a school I never applied to?” Wisteria slapped the desk with her open palm, sending papers, quills, and a glass paperweight toppling to the floor.

Yui Wei straightened. “I found a good opportunity for you.”

“An opportunity for me or for you?”

“I don’t have time for a full discussion,” Yui Wei retorted, gesturing at the man sitting across the desk.

“Who is this? Why is there a soldier in the monastery?” Wisteria asked, for the first time giving her full attention to the man’s armor and the crest of the Emperor on his chest.

The man seemed about to reply, but Yui Wei answered for him. “This doesn’t concern you.”

Wisteria looked from the soldier to her mother. “I didn’t realize you were in the habit of keeping secrets from me.”

“It’s necessary,” Yui Wei told her. “Just like your attendance at Eastridge.”

“Necessary? I’m staying here. I have no intention of leaving.”

“I understand your intentions,” Yui Wei said. “I am ignoring them.”

“You’re ignoring them?” Wisteria stifled a scream. “Don’t you care about my happiness at all?”

“Raising your voice sufficiently conveys your disbelief, but I assure you, it does nothing to change my mind,” Yui Wei said, eyes flashing. “Stop being childish. This is what’s best for you and your training. Now, if there’s nothing else, go pack. You leave for Eastridge at dawn.”

“Mother...” Wisteria started, in a softer tone. With a glance at the stranger, she drew close to her mother and spoke quietly so he couldn’t hear. “You have no idea what leaving would do to me. Everything I know and love is here in this monastery. I couldn’t leave. I can’t.”

Yui Wei gave her daughter a hard, skeptical glare. “We will have to see about that.”

“You would sacrifice me to a pack of wolves if the opportunity presented itself!” Gone was any softness in tone or manner. Wisteria cast a disdainful look at her mother and crossed the room in quick strides.

“*That* is a ridiculous idea,” Yui Wei said as Wisteria threw open her door. “Wolves don’t venture this far up the mountain.”

Chapter 1 – Welcome to Eastridge

Averi watched with wide eyes as a black-haired Rawenese boy brought a shield up to block the battleaxe that had just been thrown at his head. Averi gasped, and the boy glanced at her and quickly winked before launching himself back into the fight. The battle was only one of several that were taking place in the Coliseum. Averi stood with the other first-year students just outside the Coliseum, waiting for Orientation.

Suddenly, a heavy tolling rang through the arena, and when it died down, the Headmistress stepped up to the front of the group. “Good afternoon, students. I am Headmistress Sansdarth.”

The words somehow carried over the clash of the weapons, and immediately a silence fell over the anxious first-years of Eastridge Academy. Averi shifted forward to get a better view of the woman at the center of the arena. Her grayed hair was pulled back tightly, and her sharp eyes skimmed the eager crowd that stood around her.

“This is our Coliseum where tournaments and the Rankings are held,” Sansdarth said. “As you can see, it’s capable of accommodating dozens of fights simultaneously.”

As Sansdarth continued to talk about the Coliseum, Averi let her eyes wander over the large marble pillars and the rows and rows of seats that lined the stadium. She’d often heard from her brothers about the intense battles that were waged here by the students. She felt a nervous flutter in her stomach. She was actually here at Eastridge. This was real.

Sansdarth finished pointing out the entrances and exits. “Now come this way,” she said, turning.

Averi and the other first-years followed her out of the Coliseum through the double arches and up the stairs leading to the base of the clock tower. Averi wished she had chosen something more practical to wear instead of the pale yellow gown and heeled shoes that her maid had laid out for her. Gathering her skirts, she was looking dubiously at the steep staircase when a voice broke through her thoughts.

“Can I help you?” a boy asked.

She found herself looking up into the deep brown eyes of a boy nearly a foot taller than her. He had an honest face framed by long, sandy brown hair, and he was frowning with concern.

“You look like you might need a hand,” he added, suddenly looking embarrassed.

“Yes,” Averi said, a blush creeping across her cheeks. Only a few minutes into orientation, and already she looked like she could hardly climb a staircase much less become an adventurer. “Thank you.”

She linked her hand around his arm, holding tight to keep herself balanced, and they began climbing at the back of the crowd. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“Fell,” he said, smiling.

“Call me Averi,” she replied. “Nice to meet you.”

By now, they were at the top of the stairs, where the group had paused.

Sansdarth gestured to the crest of the hill Eastridge was built on, where several imposing buildings were situated. “Here, you’ll find the Headmaster’s Hall, your classrooms, and the clock tower.”

“Are those... students?” Fell asked, pointing to the black-clad figures scaling up the clock tower.

“Thieves, I’d imagine,” Averi said, as one reached the top and melted into the shadows of the belfry.

From the clock tower, Sansdarth led them down a set of stairs that circled the outside of the Coliseum. The stairs opened up onto the lower level where gardens leading to both the forest and the Library sprouted in the west. Along the outside of the Library, Mages and Clerics lounged on the benches, reading through scrolls and practicing magic. Averi saw Fell wince as a burst of fire scorched the air.

“On the eastern side of the Coliseum,” Sansdarth said, “you’ll find the Infirmary and the Sparring Grounds. Don’t forget that after lunch, Mage and Cleric students must report to the Coliseum to test into casting classes. Warriors, report to the Sparring Grounds for equipment training.”

They made their way down the winding stairs to the lowest level. When they reached the bottom, Averi reluctantly pulled her hand away from Fell. She gave him a small, grateful smile.

“And here,” Sansdarth said with a gesture, “is where you’ll be living.” The dorms, the dining commons, and the student gardens sprawled in front of them. “Welcome home.”

With that, Sansdarth dismissed them to find their rooms. All the first years were living in Drop Tower, the girls on the second floor and the boys on the first. Averi and Fell parted ways to search for their rooms.

Averi headed to the west wing with the other Mage majors. The hallway was strewn with thick sets of rune books, enchanted objects, and scorched armor and training gear as well as students enthusiastically moving in. At the end of the hall, she found her room. She unlocked the door and pushed it open.

The room was smaller than she had expected, especially for two people. On each side, there was a low bed and a sturdy, wooden desk, along with a wardrobe. Her side was already piled high with the trunks and books her servants had carried in earlier. The floor was polished hardwood, and the walls were painted a soft cream color. Above the door, there was an etching of a phoenix carrying a black opal, which Averi supposed made sense: there would be a tribute to the legendary Mage Kaethe in the rooms of the Mages in this dormitory. She had only just closed the door behind her when it was flung open.

A petite, half-Nornese girl with long, wild dark hair and fierce eyes stormed in. Her glare fell on Averi, and she stopped short. “I must be in the wrong room,” the girl said, as she backed out and slammed the door shut.

Averi stood frozen, staring at the door. After a minute had passed, the door was flung open again, and the same girl charged through a second time.

“What are you doing in my room?” she demanded.

“*Your* room?” Averi asked archly. She drew herself up to her full height, noticing that she was easily taller than this strange girl. “I’ve been assigned to this room.”

“That’s impossible. *I’ve* been assigned to this room. We can’t both be meant to live here.”

“Actually, I think that’s exactly the idea,” Averi said mildly.

The girl took Averi’s words skeptically but observed that there were indeed two beds and two sets of furniture, and let loose a string of Nornese, of which Averi thankfully only caught the general gist.

“Even the worst accommodations at the monastery would never impose this...this forced cohabitation,” the girl said.

“Didn’t you read your acceptance papers?” Averi asked. “Only the upper-classmen have singles.”

The girl looked at her murderously and threw her belongings down on her side of the room.

Averi turned back to her own trunk and plucked her acceptance papers out of a stack of books. “I’m Averi, by the way,” she said, searching for the name of her roommate. “And you must be Raven.”

She winced. “A misprint. Call me Wisteria.”

Quite a misprint, Averi thought.

Wisteria pointed at a spot in the middle of the room. “This is the line. You stay on your side. I stay on my side. The door is neutral territory.”

Just then, there was a soft rapping on the door in question.

“Come in,” Averi called at the same time as Wisteria shouted, “Go away.”

Averi gave an apologetic half-smile in answer to Wisteria’s annoyed frown as the door swung open.

“Princess Avertis.” A strikingly beautiful, blonde girl in a richly adorned emerald gown strode in. Her full lips brushed Averi’s cheek as she embraced her.

“Lady Emberlynn,” Averi said. “It’s been too long.”

“Please, call me Annalise.” She gestured to three girls waiting in the hall. “And perhaps you remember Lady Peony, Lady Celia, and Lady Calla-Lilly. Though I don’t believe I’ve met Lady...” she trailed off with a questioning glance at Wisteria.

“Wisteria,” Averi supplied.

“Ah,” Annalise said. “And where are you from, Lady Wisteria? I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you at Court.”

“I’ve never been,” Wisteria said icily. “I’m from the Ling Monastery.”

Averi recalled that the Ling Monastery was an important political ally because of its connection with the Nornese... and she also recalled that the monastery’s people were widely known for their disdain of royal authority.

“How exotic,” Annalise said. She turned back to Averi. “We’re heading to lunch. Would you care to join us, Princess?”

Averi hesitated, her eyes going to Wisteria who clearly wasn’t invited.

Wisteria pushed past the nobles. “I was just leaving,” she said, walking out the door.

“Then we won’t keep you,” Annalise said smugly. After Wisteria had left, Annalise lowered her voice to a whisper. “Don’t worry. She might be your roommate, but we’ll make sure you meet all the right people here.”

Averi forced a smile. Already, it seemed that life at Eastridge was getting complicated. “You mentioned lunch?”

~*~

At lunch, Rai Ravin found himself quite literally in a den of Thieves. He was sitting at a table of boys who were also in the Thief major. The other Thieves argued boisterously as they sized each other up, trading street stories and arguing over bragging rights.

“I’m from up at Port Lynn, Seaside District,” a boy called Quin said. “Won’t find a rougher place than that to get an education in Thieving.”

The other boy, Nox, grimaced. “Miserable place. I passed through there once on my way to the Royal City. Now *that’s* where all the really good marks are.”

Rai had spent most of his life around the Royal City. Of course, he was probably one of the marks these boys were talking about.

“It doesn’t matter what you snatched in Port Lynn. It wouldn’t come close to one night’s haul in the Royal City,” Nox continued, nodding across the Dining Commons.

Rai followed his gaze and saw a cluster of noble young ladies whose attire would have been more in keeping with a ballroom.

“Look at the necklace on the blonde,” Nox said, letting out a low whistle. “I could lift that off without her even noticing.”

“If you want to get expelled,” Quin pointed out. “That’s one of the Princesses of Easden.”

Rai leaned forward to get a better look at the group. There, in the center, he saw her. The sunlight caught her pale hair and lit up her amber eyes. There was a hint of impatience in her smile, one that Rai knew he understood.

“Stop staring,” Quin said, elbowing Rai. “You’re making us look bad.”

Rai grinned. “Couldn’t help myself.”

Quin raised an eyebrow. “Were you staring at the girl or the jewels?”

“Does it matter?” Nox asked with a laugh. “By the way, Metis, if you want your ring back, you’d best return my lucky copper.”

The other boy swore and fished in his pocket for Nox’s copper. Rai watched the exchange between the two. As far as he could tell, the primary form of recreation for the Thief majors was pick-pocketing each other and bargaining for returns.

Rai had stayed out of the contest. Modesty wasn’t his strong suit, but even he had to suspect that going up against Thieves who had been working for years as pick-pockets was a bad idea.

Besides, he was much more interested in the Princess... as were many of the boys of Eastridge. He watched as one after another made his way up to introduce himself to her. He wanted to go up and talk to her, but he didn't want to be just another admirer. He'd have to create some other opportunity...

"You've dropped your guard, Ravin," Quin observed as the bell tolled for the end of lunch, and the boys stood.

With a sinking feeling, Rai checked his pockets. They were empty. His room key was gone.

The boys snickered.

"Aren't you going to try to get it back?" Nox asked innocently.

Rai had no idea who had stolen his key, but he was certain that he wasn't yet good enough to snatch anything comparable to barter with. And he wasn't about to beg for his own room key back. So instead, he shrugged nonchalantly.

"Keep it," he said, turning to leave. "A good Thief doesn't need keys."

~*~

Wisteria knew it was pointless to hope that she'd never have to see her roommate again, but it hardly seemed fair that she'd run into the girl at the Coliseum where all the first-year Mages had gathered to test out of remedial runes.

It wasn't bad enough that Wisteria had to have a roommate; she also had to be rooming with one of the Princesses of Easden. She wasn't sensitive enough to be bothered by Annalise's slights, but that still didn't make it pleasant.

All around the Coliseum, students were lining up in rows to take turns demonstrating their rune-work. Wisteria made it a point to go to the farthest side of the arena away from Averi, getting in line behind a group of four rowdy boys.

“Bet I can Blast it back five feet.” The tallest boy in the group boasted. He had a prominent nose with a faint scar at the tip, dark skin, and deep black hair that he ran his fingers through. He eyed the center of the ring where a tall, formidable boulder had been placed as a target for the Mages.

“Sure, Vane,” another boy said. This one was half a head shorter but was more muscular with chestnut brown hair and a wide smirk on his olive-toned features. “I bet you end up casting a Light Rune.”

“Better watch that mouth of yours, Sariil. You’re up first,” Vane snorted, pushing his friend forward. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Wisteria watched as the boy called Sariil stepped forward.

“Sariil Darek,” he told the professor, who checked his name off a list.

“Sariil, please choose one of the following runes to demonstrate your ability: Light, Hold, or Blast.”

“I’ll cast the Blast Rune,” Sariil said.

The professor nodded and stepped out of the way. “When you’re ready,” he said, indicating the boulder.

Sariil took a deep breath and held up his right hand. With five quick strokes, he traced out the Blast Rune in the air, calling the magic in front of him into being. Then he cast it, hurling the glowing rune at the boulder. The rune hit the rock, punching a dent in its side. Sariil stepped back, looking satisfied.

The professor made a note and gestured for him to move on. Sariil stepped aside, but hung back to watch the others.

“Vane Aloric,” the dark-haired one said. “I’ll also do the Blast Rune.”

Vane’s barely scratched the boulder, but the boy who went after him left a sizeable crack running through the rock. He was still gloating as Wisteria stepped forward.

“Wisteria Ling,” she said without thinking. But as the professor furrowed his brow over the papers, she corrected herself. “I mean, Raven. I’ll try the Blast Rune.”

Calling up the magic was second nature to her after training at the Ling Monastery. She wrote out the Blast Rune easily, pouring power into every line of it. It was almost a relief to have something to do with all her pent-up energy. She recalled her fight with her mother, the hours of traveling, and the pretentious nobles. Then she cast it.

The Blast Rune spun towards the boulder, and when it hit, the force slammed the boulder back, toppling it over.

Everyone in the Coliseum stopped to stare at her. The boys ahead of her fell silent.

“Sorry,” Wisteria muttered to the professor.

As she turned to leave, Sariil put a hand on her arm, stopping her. “Who are you? Where’d you train to get that good?”

She looked down at his hand on her, and he quickly pulled it away. “I’m Wisteria. From the Ling Monastery.”

“Well, Wisteria Ling of the Ling Monastery,” Sariil said, not noticing her wince at the mention of her last name. “You seem like a worthy opponent. I look forward to facing you in class tomorrow.”

“Sure,” Wisteria said, stepping around him. “See you tomorrow.”

~*~

While the Mages were finishing their rune tests, Fell Farmington was settling into his room in the west wing of Drop Tower. Though Fell had unpacked hours before, his belongings only took up one small corner of the wardrobe. He had no books or papers to put on the desk. And so, having run out of things to do, he sat on his bed, marveling at the room. He had never seen such luxury. His own bed, his own desk, his own chair, his own wardrobe... and the room was easily three times the size of the hayloft that he used to sleep in... and it wasn't cluttered with stray cats. Fell did have a roommate, Javen, but he had seen little of him other than the trunk at the foot of one of the beds. Where could he be all this time?

Thinking of his roommate made Fell restless to explore the dormitory. Taking one last look at his room as though to reassure himself that it was really real and would stay put while he was gone, Fell cautiously opened his door and glanced around the hallway. He had just enough time to duck down as a hide-bound ball flew by his head.

"Look out!" someone called, laughing, as Fell didn't duck far enough to avoid the second ball. It crashed into his forehead, and he fell down, head ringing and vision blurring. But the sensation was too familiar to be alarming; Fell blinked away the dizzy-feeling and shook his head. In a matter of seconds, his head cleared, and Fell jumped back up.

He looked around and saw that it was Javen who had thrown the balls. He and Cai, another first-year that Fell had met earlier, were throwing the balls down the length of the hall with a few other boys that Fell hadn't met.

Fell picked up the ball that had hit him and tossed it back to Javen, smiling good-naturedly to show that he wasn't hurt. Javen nodded his thanks, but since he didn't extend an invitation for Fell to join in, Fell thought it best to get out of their way. Double-checking that he

had his key firmly in his hand, Fell shut the door and locked it behind him. It was a short walk to the end of the hall, and once Fell was out of the way of the game, he relaxed and started looking around him.

The dormitory was the largest building Fell had ever been in. He knew that each wing of Drop Tower was devoted to a different major and that there were common areas at the end of each hall. That's where he decided to go.

First, Fell meandered through the small library on the third floor that featured books relevant to the Warrior Major. Fell ran his hands across some of the leather-bound spines: *How to Fall and How to Fight: The Basics of Combat; An Illustrated Guide to Grabs, Holds, and Throws*; and *Theories and Practices of Swords-Work*. The titles caught his interest, so he picked up all three and carried them with him.

Wondering what was on the second floor, Fell ventured down there and found an extensive training room. From punching bags to sparring equipment, everything was well-maintained and the best that money could buy. Fell couldn't take his eyes away from it. Back home, he had spent hours setting up what he could— stitching up a burlap sack stuffed with hay for a punching bag, finding and shaping a heavy stick that was relatively straight for a practice sword. This set up made his efforts seem even more pathetic, and all the worse for the fact that he had considered his training room one of his greatest accomplishments.

He felt his face burning with embarrassment, but at least the room was nearly deserted and with luck, he could retreat before anyone noticed he had wandered in...

Of course, Fell had no such luck.

As he turned to walk out, he nearly collided with five older boys blocking the doorway. He could tell immediately that they were older—they were heavily-muscled and moved with an

easiness that all the upperclassmen seemed to intrinsically possess. And perhaps most obviously, they all openly wore weaponry of various sorts, which was strictly forbidden for first-years.

“What’s this hayseed doing here?” one of them shouted.

Another sighed. “The entire Serathian army could sneak up on him, and he wouldn’t notice unless he tripped over a sword. How could a kid like this get into the most prestigious academy for combat training in the realm?”

“Obviously not wealth, unless he’s some sort of princeling in disguise.”

“Those are always so obvious, and they always have twice the confidence of this bumpkin.”

Fell looked down. They were still blocking the way out of the room. It was clear they weren’t going to let him leave until they were through with him.

“We can rule out connections.”

“Unless he did some passing noble a good turn.”

“It would take more than the usual noble; he’d have to have blasted near saved the Emperor.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter now that we’re here to take care of it,” the closest one concluded. “He’ll be running back to his farm before breakfast.” With that, he shoved Fell back, hard enough to make him fall flat on the ground, books slipping out of his hands and crashing to a heap on the floor.

“He brought books to the training room, Torrent,” the boy who had pushed him said.

Torrent shook his head. “Maybe he’s lost. Maybe he thinks this is the Library.”

“If you want to study, go be a Cleric,” the first one said, grabbing Fell’s shirt and pulling him to his feet.

Fell's long years with Lanks had taught him better than to try to talk back to them. Bullying was nothing new, although the difference between these warriors-in-training and the kids back home was enough to make Fell's heart leap into his throat. Torrent and his crew were trained, skilled warriors. Lanks had been nothing more than an older kid out to get him. And then again, while Lanks and the others might thrash him, they never got more creative than their fists. These upperclassmen all had real weapons.

But much to Fell's relief, no one made a move to touch their swords. Instead, Torrent casually said, "Rakam, why don't you teach him what he can't learn in books?" and the boy who had shoved him pulled him into one of the sparring rings.

"Fight! Fight!" the others began chanting.

"You want to be a Warrior?" Rakam said. "You want to be tough?" He roughly pushed Fell into the center of the ring. "You know Warriors fight, right?"

Fell looked around, noticing that a small crowd had gathered. Then he looked back at Rakam.

"So if you want to be a Warrior," Rakam spread his arms open, grinning at Fell. "Then hit me."

Fell gulped. Every part of him clamored that this was a trap. But it was a trap that he was already too far tangled in to get out unscathed. And if he was going to get one hit, he might as well make it count. Fell leaned back, pulling his right fist back for a more powerful swing. Then he swung, throwing his whole body into the punch. If it would only land, Fell was sure Rakam would at least be dazed.

But only inches before impact, Rakam grabbed Fell's fist with his right hand, redirecting the punch to the empty air next to him. With his left hand, Rakam slammed Fell with a quick, powerful hit to his head.

Momentum still carrying him forward, Fell tumbled face-forward onto the mat. He tried to roll to his feet, but he was too slow. While he was still half on the ground, Rakam caught him with a sharp kick to his stomach. Scrambling faster this time, Fell was nearly on his feet before Rakam rammed his elbow into Fell's nose with a painful crunch that everyone watching recognized as the sound of a broken nose.

Blood poured out as Fell crouched, hunched over in pain. "You better go see the Clerics," Torrent called out, provoking laughter from the group.

Holding his sleeve to his nose, Fell staggered over to where his books had fallen. Careful to not get any blood on the pages, Fell picked up the books with one hand. Holding the books to his chest, and without looking back at the Warriors laughing at him, Fell ran out of the training room.

~*~

It was getting dark, and Rai was getting worried.

He was no closer to getting his key back, but right now he would've settled for a way into Drop Tower. The outer doors were always locked, and with curfew only minutes away, all the first years were already inside.

Well, he had been intending to visit the Princess. No time like the present.

It didn't take long to find her room. He knew she must be in the Mage wing, and after only a light amount of trial and error, he found himself standing beneath her window.

Rai eyed the tree outside her window warily. Looking up, he saw Averı move away from the window ledge, and the lights in the room were suddenly extinguished. That decided him. He put a hand on the lowest branch and swung himself up.

After only a few minutes of climbing, he reached the top. There were three windows outside the room, two small windows framing a third bigger window. But what interested Rai most was the foot-wide ledge beneath each of them. It was too dark to see which window was Averı's, so he took a leap of faith. He overshot the distance, his elbow thudding against the windowpane as he struggled to keep his balance.

He glanced through the window and saw a sleeping form, her head obscured from his view by her pillow. Kneeling, he rapped on the window.

The girl shifted and looked up at him. As soon as she turned to face him, he could tell that he had the wrong roommate. Her dark hair fell wildly around her, and her eyes flashed with annoyance. Instantly, she scrambled for a Light Sphere. He gave her his most winning smile, but she merely raised an eyebrow. He pointed down at the latch.

She opened the latch, pushing out the window a few inches and nearly knocking him off the ledge.

"I knew there was something I didn't like about these ledges," she said dryly. "Most girls just have flowers."

He knelt closer to her. "Don't worry. You can trust me," he told her.

"Oh, well, as long as you say so, I feel *much* better that some stranger is attempting to sneak into my room," she said.

"If I was trying to sneak into your room, I probably wouldn't have knocked," he pointed out. "Now, can I ask you for a favor?"

“You don’t seem like someone with much of an alternative.”

He chuckled. “You’re right. I’m at your mercy.”

“What do you want?” she asked. Rai wondered if she had been finally baited into genuine curiosity or if she was simply trying to get rid of him.

“I’m looking for someone—”

“Wisteria, are you letting a *Thief* into our room?” Averi’s voice interrupted him, and he turned to the bed on the right. Averi slid out of bed as Rai jumped to the middle ledge to meet her.

The moonlight coming in from the big window was behind him, so while she only saw his silhouette, he could see her softly-lit features as she smiled warily at him.

“Princess, you’re looking lovely this evening,” he said to her.

“I’m sure you didn’t break curfew and sneak into our room just to tell me that,” Averi said with a reluctant smile. “If they caught you in here...”

“I’d pretty much become a hero,” he finished for her.

“What *did* you come here for that couldn’t wait until tomorrow?” Averi looked up into his eyes.

“To see for myself that you made it in. I’d feel terrible if I had hurt your chances.”

“Despite your best efforts, I was accepted.”

“If you’re going to hold it against me,” he said, “the least you can do is give me a chance to make it up to you.”

Wisteria cleared her throat loudly.

“But maybe this isn’t the best time for that conversation,” he conceded. “Ladies, I’m terribly sorry to have kept you up. Given the late hour, it’s perfectly understandable that you forgot to invite me in.”

“How rude of me,” Averi allowed, though Wisteria scoffed. “Would you care to exit through the door instead of your window?” Averi gestured at the door.

“Thank you.” He jumped through the window into their room. “And now, good—”

His words were suddenly cut off by a sharp howling of wind that came from the other side of the girls’ door. Tendrils of ice curled around the door handle and crept under the frame. Then the door burst open, slamming back to reveal an irate upperclassman with pale, severe features, dark hair, and the bearing of a Warrior.

“Wraith Ravinswood,” Evelyn Icecaster said, her blue eyes fixed on the boy. “I should have known you’d be the first to break curfew this year.”

“Lady Evelyn Icecaster, a pleasure as always,” he said with a bow. “It’s been too long. You really should come to Court more often.”

“You aren’t charming you’re way out of this one, Rai,” Evelyn said, advancing on him. “You and these girls broke the rules. On the first night, no less.”

“I take full responsibility,” Rai said, holding up his hands. “It was entirely my fault. These girls had only the best intentions of going to sleep early tonight.”

“Sure.” She grabbed hold of his shirt collar, leading him out of the room with a warning glare at Averi. She slammed the door shut behind her. “For future reference, Ravin, I’m overseeing this floor. If you absolutely *must* romance someone, try one of the Clerics.” She turned him loose in the hallway and stormed back to her room.

Well, that certainly was one way to make an exit, Rai thought. At the very least, he was sure the Princess wouldn't be forgetting him anytime soon.

~*~

Fell hid in the library until his nose stopped bleeding and the clock tolled for curfew. Then, he slowly made his way down the empty hallway to his room. Back in the safety of his own room, Fell let out a shuddering breath and shut the door softly. Javen was already snoring soundly from his bed, so Fell quietly put his books down on his side of the room and silently curled up in the corner of his bed. He pulled the blanket around him and pushed the pillow around so that he barricaded himself into the smallest corner.

There, Fell buried his face in his mattress, ignoring the pain from his broken nose. On his application he had written Fallan, the name of a Warrior. What a fool he had been. Changing his name on a piece of paper didn't make a scrap of difference. He was Fell Farmington still, through and through. The same boy who was always being beaten by Lanks and Yan. The same boy who would be a bonded laborer for the rest of his life.

The only thing that had changed with Fell's acceptance to Eastridge was how thoroughly he was getting beaten. Fell painfully replayed the fight in his mind, wincing at all of his movements. That first swing of his had been ridiculous. No wonder Rakam had caught his punch. When Fell had pulled back his fist, the motion must have shown Rakam exactly what he intended to do. How had Rakam managed to punch him with that much force without pulling back as obviously?

Fell turned the matter over in his mind, unsuccessfully trying to figure out how it worked. What could he have done differently?

Fell opened his eyes. He didn't have the answers yet. And that, he realized, was why he was here. Classes started tomorrow. All these guys had on him was training...and muscles. It hadn't escaped his notice that all the other Warrior majors were twice as muscular as he was. But what did that matter? This was just the starting point. From now on, Fell would work twice as hard. He'd study twice as much. And he'd get there faster because he wanted it more than they did.

Fell Farmington was no Warrior, that was true. And yes, Fallan was just a name, a name of a Warrior who didn't exist. But, Fell decided, that didn't matter so much anymore. What mattered was that someday Fallan *would* exist and Fell *would* be a Warrior. And each day, starting with tomorrow, would bring him one step closer.

Chapter 2 – First Fights

Wisteria woke up as the clock tower tolled the sixth hour of the day. At Ling Monastery, everyone kept early hours, and Wisteria intended to keep those hours so she wouldn't be out of practice when she returned. When Yui Wei had made her point, Wisteria was certain her mother would let her come home. Surely she would be home in only a matter of weeks. Wisteria slipped a sensible blue tunic over a gray work habit. She grabbed her mage's cloak and left while the Princess still slept, effectively avoiding her roommate entirely.

Eastridge wasn't so bad when it was completely deserted. The morning air was cold and refreshing, and mist drifted along the grounds, briefly reminding Wisteria of the Divide. Wisteria frowned: thinking of home reminded her of her mother, someone she didn't want to think about at the moment.

She meandered through the maze of walkways around the school grounds, following a small, cobblestone path into the gardens. Taking the path to its end, she found a rough enclave. There was a bench and enough space to constitute a clearing. Surrounded by trees and bushes, it seemed that this corner of the grounds had been forgotten.

Wisteria smiled slightly. Here, at least, she could get away from the rush and clamor of the Eastridge students. She reclined on the bench, already feeling more at ease than she felt in her room. She hadn't slept well after Averi's visitor had left. Something about Wraith Ravinswood had bothered her.

It might've been the way he seemed to have already charmed her roommate, which she took as a bad omen that she'd be seeing more of him. It might've been that he'd already gotten her in trouble with the upperclassman who oversaw their floor, though Wisteria had never been

one to be afraid of trouble. But increasingly Wisteria realized that what bothered her was the fact that she had opened the window when, by all rights, she should have ignored him and alerted Evelyn herself. That's what she'd do the next time she saw him.

That settled, Wisteria took advantage of the quiet to meditate as the sun climbed in the sky and the mist burned away. The tolling of the clock tower reminded her of her classes.

The first Mage class was *Introductory Rune Magic*, which was held in one of the main blocks of classrooms. Wisteria arrived early and slunk into a seat in the back corner. The room was huge, easily twice the size of most rooms at the Monastery. The high ceilings were held up with pillars, and there were rows and rows of stone benches. As Wisteria marveled at the workmanship, wondering to what extent magic had played a role in the construction, a group of giggling girls sat down in front of her as the professor walked in.

Wisteria might have mistaken him for an upper-level student if it hadn't been for the casual way he carried himself. No students were *that* at ease on the first day of classes. But for that, Wisteria wouldn't have thought he was a professor. Still young, he had dark brown hair swept messily over deep black eyes. When he took the center of the room and began to write his name on the board, the girls in front of Wisteria took note of him in hushed exclamations.

"That's our teacher?"

"I'm never missing this class."

"Aren't you glad you minored in Mage work?"

It took all of Wisteria's will power to physically refrain from rolling her eyes. Yet, somehow she managed.

As the clock tower chimed the eighth hour, Professor Valint, or so the board read, began to speak. In what could only be described as a drawl, he said, "Welcome to *Introductory Rune*

Magic. As you know, runes are the alphabet of spell-casting, so this class is required for all majors and minors. You wouldn't be in this class if you didn't already know the fundamentals of using runes in mage-work. So this class will move quickly. We'll meet three times a week here. There'll be two mid-terms and a final examination. Halfway through the year, you can apply to have a rune inscribed on you, and if your grades are high enough and your application is compelling enough, you'll receive one on Rune Day. Now please pull out your textbooks and turn to the beginning of 'Chapter One: A Brief History of Runes'."

Wisteria pulled out her textbook, but it held little interest for her. The entire first chapter was some blathering explanation about the mysterious origins of the rune system and how mages first discovered that runes could be used to work greater magic. Instead of following along with Valint's lecture, Wisteria pulled out her the one book she had owned at the Ling Monastery, her *Book of Runes*. Discreetly flipping it open to a new page on her lap, she began studying, still keeping an eye on the board so she could follow Valint's lecture.

~*~

The Combat Casting classroom was unlike any classroom Wisteria had ever seen. Instead of desks and chairs, the room was an open stadium, full of varying types of terrain, from rocky surfaces to a trickling stream that ran from one corner to another. The class met at the center, in a dusty dry patch of dirt surrounded by scattered clumps of rock and rubble. At the front was one long wooden table that Wisteria guessed was where the teacher would stand.

As the students waited for the tolling of the clock tower that would signify the start of class, Wisteria took the opportunity to size up the other Mages. From a variety of places, the young Mages-in-training mostly wore light training clothes that allowed for easy movement.

Only her roommate was dressed richly, though she had traded her ball gown for simple breeches and a golden tunic embroidered with flowers and jewels.

As the clock tower began to toll, the slight chatter of conversation that had been bubbling fell flat. By the time the bell had tolled nine times, marking the ninth hour, the class had parted and settled, and Wisteria was able to see the woman standing at the front of the group.

“As some of you already know, I am Professor Colwyn,” she said, “and this is Combat Casting.”

With auburn hair and ice blue eyes, Professor Colwyn towered over most of her students. She wore her hair pulled back in a braid, and her dark blue mage robes fastened all the way from her neck to her knees with golden clasps. She had a commanding presence, partially due to her unusual height, but equally due to the easy authority with which she spoke.

“The books for this class are *The Basics of Combat Casting* and *Dangerous Magic: Attack Spells and Counters*. For now, we’ll be working with the first one. Have the first three chapters read by tomorrow. This won’t be like your other classes,” Professor Colwyn said. “You won’t have to wonder whether some obscure fact will ever prove itself useful. Although, you can take my word for it, in magic, you’ll end up using everything you’ve ever learned.” She gave them a thin smile. “But in this class, my dear magelings, you’ll learn how to fight and how to survive. And we begin right now. Pair up.”

Most people paired with their roommates, and while Wisteria knew she should think twice about this, she found herself seeking out Averil. But before she could get to her, she found herself surrounded by the four boys from the rune test.

One of the light-haired boys got to her first. “Wisteria, do you have a—”

“Wisteria Ling, I’m facing you today,” Vane interrupted, pushing past the other boy.

“Sure,” she said slowly.

“Not so confident?” Vane baited her.

She surprised herself by laughing. Vane reminded her of the boys she used to train with at the Ling Monastery. “Overconfidence is a sign of weakness,” she quipped back as they squared off. The other boys snickered, pairing up with each other.

There was one left partnerless, and he turned to Averi doubtfully.

“I guess it’s you and me,” he said. “I’m Sariil.”

“Averi,” she said, sounding equally doubtful about this pairing. But it was too late.

Professor Colwyn was already beginning her lesson.

“Casting and combat casting are worlds apart, children. There are five main differences that you’ll notice immediately. These are called the Casting Factors. The first and perhaps the biggest difference between the two is Time. Obviously in combat, you need simpler runes or assurances that your team will be able to protect you long enough to get the spell off.”

Wisteria glanced around and realized many students had pulled quills and bound notebooks out of their robes and were jotting down notes. Averi seemed to be copying every word verbatim. Wisteria felt a pang of homesickness. No one at the Ling Monastery ever took notes.

“The second is Energy,” Colwyn was saying. “In your workshop, you can use up all your energy on one spell and then rest for a week to replenish. In the field, you might have to cast several times a battle over hours, or even days, without rest. The third factor is Counter-Casting. If your spell is easily countered, it probably isn’t worth the trouble. Fourth, Peripherals. What do you need in order to cast the spell? If you have a few choice items, casting can be a lot easier and a lot more powerful.”

Professor Colwyn paused, looking over the class. Some were furiously scribbling notes, trying to get every word down. “Lastly,” she said, continuing at the same rapid speed, “there’s the little matter of Accuracy. Can you get the rune right? Can you hit your target? A botched spell in combat is the worst thing that can happen to you and your team. And it nearly always means injury if not fatality, either from the backfire on your spell or a casting from the other side, which now has the upper hand.”

Even the people taking notes paused for a moment to appreciate the chilling reality of what Professor Colwyn was telling them.

“This week,” she continued, “we’ll be concentrating on the first of these five factors, using Water Orbs and the Bounce Rune.”

A ripple went through the students, some expressing disappointment, others apprehension.

“We’ll start with a Water Rune and put a little variation on it so it suits our purposes. Half of you will cast the spell, and the other half will cast the counter.”

As Colwyn spoke, she drew the spells in the air, the magic hanging in shimmers as students scribbled down the lines. “The first is for Orb of Water, the second is for Bounce. Create the water sphere, then Bounce it back and forth.”

“Someday, you’ll be throwing and reflecting Fire Balls, but for now, this is safer and the idea is the same. Focus on the timing of the casting and counter casting. Stand at least twenty yards apart to give each other ample time. Now, begin,” Colwyn said.

Wisteria and Averi found themselves next to each other, facing off against Vane and Sariil respectively. Wisteria called out, “Ready?”

Vane nodded off-handedly.

Wisteria carefully etched out the Water Orb spell and executed it, calling into being a perfect sphere of water. It rippled and sparkled in the sunlight as Wisteria nudged it towards Vane, wondering if her partner would even be able to return it if he hadn't paid attention to the spells.

To her surprise, Vane drew the rune with the quick hand of someone familiar with magic and sent the Water Orb speeding back to her twice as fast as she had sent it to him. Wisteria narrowed her eyes. So that was how it was going to be.

She just barely had time to draw out and execute the familiar Bounce Rune. She slammed it into the Water Orb, the water rippling in protest where the rune impacted, and the orb hurtled back towards Vane.

Vane had a Bounce Rune ready and waiting, and by now, the Water Orb had built up momentum. With each Bounce back and forth, its speed quickened. Glancing at the pairs around them, Wisteria saw that theirs was clearly traveling much faster than anyone else's. The speed accelerated until Vane and Wisteria were barely hesitating in between spells.

Vane was starting to get arrogant, throwing the Water Orb at her feet or at her head, making it more difficult to Bounce back. Wisteria frowned. She needed to end this. This time, when she cast the Bounce Rune, she spun it sharply, sending the orb veering to the side. Vane didn't have time to Bounce it back; in fact, he barely dodged out of the way.

Unfortunately, because of the angle, the Orb flew straight at Averi. The Princess, intent on her own casting, never saw it coming. The orb smashed into her face, making her fall backwards in a spray of water, coughing and sputtering. Wisteria gaped.

The other students burst into restrained laughter that simmered as a whisper went around that it was the Princess who had fallen.

“This isn’t a game, children,” Professor Colwyn said, picking up and slamming her books on the table. Her delicate voice hardened as she said, “Someday, what you learn here *will* be the difference between your life and your death. And the *reason* why I’m so adamant about teaching you children these basics is that there are enough students who don’t survive all seven years here at Eastridge and even more who die out in the field. And it’s my job to make sure there are as few of either as possible.”

Averi slowly and quietly climbed to her feet, although the rustling of her robes sounded like thunder booming in the quiet that hung in the air after Professor Colwyn’s speech.

Everyone seemed to hold his or her breath until, at last, she said, “Dismissed.”

~*~

Wisteria was surprised by all the people she’d managed to offend in the two days she’d been at the Academy. She had alienated the servants by not tipping the proper amount, quarreled with the kitchen staff over the food, and to top it all off, had landed the magical equivalent of a sucker punch on her roommate in class—not that the last part hadn’t been a little satisfying, but it was hardly a *nice* thing for her to do.

Wisteria briefly debated apologizing to Averi, but she had no idea how to actually go about it. So instead, she quickened her pace to make it early to her last class of the morning.

The Art of Healing was held in one of the laboratory rooms. Bottles of various ingredients, cooking knives, small fire pits, and empty beakers lay on top of dark, wooden tables. The students who had shown up early were clustered in the back talking quietly, and Wisteria walked to stand with them. Above the door to the room hung the crest of Allora, a wyvern serpent entwined around a protective circle and the widely recognized symbol for practicing Clerics.

The professor was already there, writing symbols onto a wide chalkboard. She looked a bit scattered despite her professional robes—gray and white ringlets of hair were clumsily secured atop her head by copper wire, while intelligent brown eyes scanned the room. At the chime of the hour, she took a leaflet of papers and stood in front of the class.

“I am Professor Aisling,” she said in a tone that was neither scattered nor clumsy. “Welcome to *The Art of Healing*. This class is mandatory for all Clerics, major or minor. We will meet twice a week for three hours. The first two hours will be devoted to lecture and bookwork, and the last hour will be spent doing hands-on work in the healing ward. For the lab-work, you will be attending to the minor injuries of Warriors from Sparring I. You will be assigned partners for the year. Once you have your partners, you can start the assignment I’ve laid out for you. We’ll start with...” She checked her roll sheet. “Aloric and Axion.”

Next to Wisteria, two boys raised their hands. Aisling pointed to a table, and they both moved to sit down there.

“Boon, Corrin.” A girl and a boy stood to take the new table that she pointed at. Wisteria settled in for a long wait, as she continued down the list. Eventually, she came to “Lane and Lux”, which alarmed Wisteria at first, but as the names ran down the list and she heard names like “Mooncaster” and “Nightling”, she remembered her name was now...

“Raven, and...Ravin.”

“What?” Wisteria asked, as another voice echoed her question.

“Would I be one of those?” a voice asked, prompting Wisteria to turn around and glare reflexively at the familiar boy behind her.

“Is there a problem?” Aisling consulted her sheet. “Wraith Ravin, and Raven, no last name.”

“Wraith Ravin would be me,” the boy said, moving to the new desk.

“And, Raven, no last name, would be me.” Wisteria slid next to her new partner as Aisling moved on. “I was hoping they’d expel you.”

“Evelyn let me off with a warning, so it looks like you’re stuck with me,” he said. “So, ‘Raven’, is it?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Wisteria said with a glare. “Wraith Ravin. How did you pick that? Don’t you think it’s a little dour?”

“Well, actually, that’s my real name. Wraith Ravin. My parents had a dark sense of humor.”

“Oh,” Wisteria said.

“But, really, ‘Wraith’ is just too serious for me. I usually drop the end, and go by ‘Rai’,” he said. He tilted his head as he looked at her. “Doesn’t the Princess call you Wisteria?”

“Yes,” Wisteria bristled.

“You’re telling me that you actually chose the name Raven over Wisteria?”

“What’s wrong with ‘Raven’?” Wisteria asked, suddenly defensive of the name that she hated. It was one thing for *her* to dislike it, but who was he to judge her?

“First off, there’s nothing wrong with the name ‘Wisteria’. Sure, if you’re going to be a famous adventurer, it’s a little hard if your name is Fred or Mildred, but Wisteria? That name’s practically made for mystery and legend.”

“What’s so wrong with Raven? Isn’t that mysterious and legendary?”

“Sure, but it’s also the most popular name in school.”

“Oh, really?” Wisteria asked dryly.

Rai blithely ignored her sarcasm. “Yes, every other angst-ridden mage and brooding warrior, whether male or female, takes the nickname Raven.”

“I haven’t heard anyone else go by that name,” she said, frowning, although come to think of it, she hadn’t been paying attention during roll call at her other classes. “There weren’t any other Ravens here today except for you.”

“This is Cleric class, though, isn’t it?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Clerics are generally...you know...”

“No, I don’t know. They’re what?”

“Cheerful.”

Wisteria raised an eyebrow over what he was implying.

“Not to say that you aren’t,” he said quickly.

“You don’t know anything about me,” Wisteria said, focusing intently on her desk.

Rai tilted his head and remarked, “I’m not opposed to learning.”

“Let’s just say I haven’t had the best experience so far,” Wisteria said.

“It’s only the first day. Give it a chance. You might find something to like about it.”

“Why bother? I’m not planning on staying.”

Rai’s jaw nearly dropped. “Eastridge is one of the hardest schools to get into. Why would you throw that all away? Why did you even apply if you didn’t want to go here?”

“Apply? I didn’t do any such thing. My mother *forged* my application,” Wisteria said, punctuating her statement by absently pounding her fist on the table. “I don’t intend to stay here any longer than necessary.”

“So you’re planning to get expelled?” Rai asked, catching her fist before she toppled one of the beakers.

Wisteria gave him an exasperated look and wrenched her hand away. “What, you think you’ll have trouble finding another lab partner?”

“Not one with your charm,” Rai said with a straight face.

Wisteria rolled her eyes, but Rai was spared her retort when Aisling assigned “Xenith and Zera” and moved on with lecture.

“Today’s lesson will cover healing the most common injuries you’ll see today on the students from sparring class...”

Sparring class? Wisteria thought. What kind of injuries could they possibly get during sparring class?

~*~

Fell Farmington had no trouble finding the Sparring Grounds. He did, however, have trouble working up the courage to enter. The circular stadium rose impressively before him. Warriors who looked like Warriors walked in, ready for the first day of training.

He saw Javen and Cai walk in, along with a handful of other Warriors that he vaguely remembered seeing earlier in the dormitory. They strolled in confidently, looking eager and excited, and received no harassment from the group of upperclassmen standing nearby. Then again, they were also *not* the nervous wreck that Fell was. For that matter, each was probably the best fighter in his village or had already mastered several forms of combat, or—

“Um, hello?” a familiar voice said.

Fell jumped, startled.

“It’s Fell, right?” the girl asked hesitantly. Turning, Fell saw it was Averi. She wore her white-blond hair back in a half-braid. She had on simple breeches and a tunic, but the garments were made of the finest material and embroidered with precious stones.

“Yes,” Fell said, quickly standing up straighter. “And you’re Averi.” This girl was probably the prettiest girl he’d ever seen, much less talked to, and she’d found him staring dumbly at the entrance to the stadium.

Averi smiled at him. “You’re a Warrior major, aren’t you? Shouldn’t you be getting to class? I’m a Warrior minor, and I think that means we’re both headed to Sparring.”

“I think you’re right,” Fell agreed, sneaking a glance at the entrance, which was thankfully clear now. “Let’s go.”

Averi and Fell walked into the Sparring Grounds together. Inside, the stadium was divided into many different arenas. The Warriors were standing in a knot at the center.

There was a tall, broad-shouldered man circling around the Warriors, slowly pacing as he surveyed the group. When the bell tolled, he began to speak.

“This is Sparring I. What we do in here is practice, but there’s a war going on out there. It’s my job to make sure you remember that,” he said. “Because wherever the fighting is, that’s where you’re going to be. Whether it’s a war or a raiding party of bandits, whatever the fight, you’ll be the ones fighting and dying to hold the line. Being a Warrior means risking death each time you step into battle.”

Some of the first-year students looked nervously at the man and the upper-classmen standing around him.

“Sparring is the fundamental core of the Warrior curriculum,” the man said. “This class is for first- and second-year students in either the Warrior major or minor. I am Professor Halden.

Technically, I oversee this class, but for the most part, you'll be working in pairs. After a few months or so, when the numbers have thinned, I'll be working more individually with each of you."

"Sir?" A girl with brown hair and skin raised her hand high in the air.

"Yes?" Halden said, looking surprised to see anyone asking a question.

"What do you mean by 'after the numbers have thinned'?"

He laughed. "For those of you who don't know, the Warrior classes have the highest wash out rate of any program at Eastridge. By next month, you'll break records if over half of you are still here."

There was a slight tremor that ran through the group of first-year students.

"Well, we'd better get started," Halden said. "Second-year students, choose your first-years."

There was a chaotic scramble as the second-year students each grabbed one or two first-years. Fell hoped that he'd be in one of the many three-person groups, but much to his dismay, Fell found Rakam looming over him.

The older boy grinned, gripping Fell's shoulder in a too-tight hold. "Looks like it's just you and me, kid," he said.

"Wait, Rakam, you don't want to, to—" Fell stammered.

"I need a partner too," Averi said, stepping up next to Fell.

The last thing Fell wanted was for Averi to be in danger with him. Even worse, he saw Torrent headed their way. But before he could protest, Torrent grabbed Averi's arm and turned her towards him. Taller than her by several inches, with dark hair and dark eyes, Torrent towered over her with a brooding expression on his face.

Fell panicked. He had to do something. He couldn't let him hurt her.

"I've got these two," Torrent said. "Go take one of those girls."

"Right. Got it," Rakam said, looking a little uncertain but moving off to corner the girl who had raised her hand earlier.

"I-I'm Averi," she faltered.

"Torrent," he said. "And you, I didn't catch your name yesterday."

"It's Fell," Fell managed to say.

Before they got any further, Professor Halden spoke again. "Now that you've all had a chance to introduce yourselves, pick a sparring ring and get started. The second-years will take the first-years through the basic sparring steps."

Fell glanced around and saw some first-years being led to the grassy rings in the center while others were taken towards sand pits or hard packed dirt rings on the edges of the stadium. Torrent pulled Fell and Averi towards a rocky ring at the edge of the Sparring Grounds.

"Well, Princess," Torrent said in a low voice, completely ignoring Fell.

"Yes?" Averi asked.

"Just so we're clear, normally I'd spend this session making sure you know what a broken finger or a twisted arm feels like," he said, squeezing her wrist. "It's a little tradition we have here, particularly when it comes to girls."

Though Averi didn't look frightened, Fell was terrified for her. His eyes fell to where Torrent's hand was locked around her wrist.

"Yes, normally," Torrent continued, "I'd make sure you knew exactly what you're getting into with this major. But something tells me that harming a Princess of Easden would land me in more trouble than it's worth."

“I don’t need special treatment,” Averi said as he finally released her.

Torrent had a cold look in his eyes when he replied, “No, Princess, you really do.”

With a sudden gesture that barely required any movement on his part, Torrent knocked his fist into Fell’s chest.

Fell had often had the wind knocked out of him, so he wasn’t surprised that he gasped in pain, unable to breathe for a few seconds as throbbing seared his lower chest.

Averi ran to Fell’s side, panic in her widening eyes. “What did you... is he going to be okay?” she demanded.

Torrent pushed her away from Fell. “I hope he’s up to taking more than that if he’s going to be a Warrior,” he said, grabbing Fell’s arm and twisting it backwards. “Welcome to your first day of Sparring.”

Fell pulled at his arm, trying to get free and fight back; instead all he did was tangle his arms up. Torrent pushed him to the ground, but Fell scrambled back to his feet.

With a smirk on his face, Torrent feinted to the left, then dodged right, jabbing Fell in the side before calmly hooking his foot behind Fell’s ankle and shoving the boy backwards. Fell fell hard on the rocks. An unnatural cracking sound as he fell told them all that he had broken something.

“Remember this,” Torrent said to Fell. “You’ll be experiencing a lot of it if you stick around.”

Whistling nonchalantly, Torrent walked away as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Averi helped Fell up. “This class doesn’t seem fair,” Averi said. “Shouldn’t they be teaching us to fight back?”

“Maybe first they’re trying to teach us how tough it is,” Fell guessed.

“Or how to take a punch?” Averi asked, though her tone was doubtful.

Fell grinned weakly. “Oh, I’ve had loads of practice at that. No wonder it’s so easy.”

“You’ll need to see a Cleric,” Averi said, glancing at Fell’s arm, which was clearly at a painful angle.

By that time, most of the first-years were sporting an injury of some sort. Halden rounded them up and instructed them to go to the Infirmary for treatment.

Fell waved good-bye to Averi with his uninjured arm and followed the other fighters to the Infirmary. Some of the second-years laughed knowingly, and Fell heard more than one of them saying that the point of Sparring was just to give the little Clerics something to practice on.

~*~

The first-year Warriors entered a spacious room filled with clean, white beds that lined the walls. Pairs of students stood hovering over each bed, eagerly waiting for someone to practice on. Fell gulped.

A brisk woman pointed at each Warrior student and sent him or her to a bed. When it came to Fell’s turn, she pointed at a pair of students in the back. As Fell approached the two Clerics, he couldn’t help noticing the girl first. Somehow, even with her slight build, she managed to terrify him, which probably had something to do with the scowl she had fixed on him.

The boy, on the other hand, smiled comfortingly, and Fell felt a little less terrified. When he reached his cot, the girl gestured impatiently for him to sit down. He quickly obeyed.

The girl started mumbling something and tracing runes in the air. The boy caught her wrist.

“What are you doing?” the boy asked. “Shouldn’t we at least introduce ourselves? My name is Rai,” he added, addressing Fell. Fell opened his mouth to reply, but the girl cut in.

“What would be the point of that?” the girl asked.

“And this is Wisteria,” Rai said, ignoring her. Wisteria huffed. “Now that we’re talking, we can ask him what’s wrong.”

Wisteria glanced at Fell’s wounded arm, then back at the boy. “Clearly, he has a broken arm.”

“Isn’t it better to ask him? What if the broken arm’s not the only thing he has?” Rai pointed out, eyeing Fell’s nose, which was still broken from the previous night’s fight.

“We could always do a low-level Probe spell,” Wisteria said, starting to trace the rune.

“Yes. Or, we could just ask,” Rai reiterated, grabbing her hand again.

“My arm is broken,” Fell cut in, hoping to prevent any more arguing. “And my nose.”

“See?” Wisteria said, dropping the magic from the Probe spell and starting again on her healing spell.

Rai watched her for a second. “Well, is there anything I should do to help?”

“I can handle it.”

In a few seconds, Wisteria had finished the spell and with a flick of her wrist, she nudged it towards Fell’s arm. The magic enveloped his broken arm in a glowing ball of light so strong Fell had to look away. When Fell looked back, the bone was set.

“Here, I’ll start re-fusing the bone together,” Rai said, beginning to write the appropriate rune set.

“No, I’ve got it,” Wisteria said, also writing the runes in the air.

Fell watched as Rai noticeably sped up.

“I’m almost done,” Rai said.

“Me too.”

“Well only one of us should—” Rai said, pushing his spell towards Fell’s arm at the exact same time as Wisteria finished hers and moved it towards Fell.

Fell desperately tried to edge away as the two spells converged on him in a shower of light that blinded all three temporarily.

“That can’t be good,” Rai said grimly.

“Doubtlessly,” Wisteria agreed, fixing Rai with an irritated look.

Before the light had even cleared, an intense pain shot through Fell’s arm, worse than the pain of the original break. The cry of pain from Fell brought Wisteria and Rai’s attention back to their patient.

“What happened?” Wisteria asked, a quickness to her voice revealing her fear.

“We cast two spells on only one wound,” Rai said. “Instead of taking days to finish, these two spells will do the work in a few hours.”

Wisteria couldn’t take her eyes off Fell as he writhed in pain. “Then... that’s good... right?” she asked doubtfully.

“There’s a reason this tactic is only used in the field,” Rai said. “No one would willingly suffer through the pain outside of a life threatening situation.”

“Oh,” Wisteria frowned, her hand moving to her shoulder, her expression torn with indecision. It was another cry of pain from Fell that sent her into action.

Wisteria dragged the right flap of her tunic down an inch to reveal two intricate runes that looked as though they had been weaved together. As outside light hit it, the top half of the rune flashed bright purple and flew forward to twist around the symbols Wisteria was already drawing

in the air with her left hand. She forced the spell away from her, focusing it all on Fell. He gulped.

The light of the fusing spell pulsed and then dissipated. Within a few seconds, Fell's pain had receded to the dull ache of the broken arm it was before.

"What did you do?" Rai asked.

"Nothing. I...removed the spell."

"Removed the spell? How did you—"

By then, Aisling had taken notice of their corner of the room and had hurried over.

Wisteria elbowed Rai.

"Just start the spell again," she hissed. "And, quickly."

Rai quickly traced the runes for the fusing spell and settled it again on Fell's arm.

"Any problems, Ravin? Raven?"

"No, Professor Aisling," Rai said.

"None," Wisteria agreed.

They both gave Fell a pointed look, and he quickly added, "Feeling much better," though the sweat still stood out on his face from the agonizing pain that was only too recent in his memory.

Aisling moved on, and Rai and Wisteria began the next step in healing Fell's arm.

Wisteria set a protection charm on Fell's arm that would lock the spell into place for the next few days, and Rai started the plaster cast.

They fell into a comfortable rhythm, working together, while Rai made amicable small talk with Fell, and as they finished, the earlier debacle had been nearly forgotten. It was only as Rai healed Fell's broken nose that Fell remembered.

“Why did it hurt so much earlier?” Fell asked.

“It was accelerated healing,” Rai explained. “It hurt for a little while because your arm was doing one day’s worth of healing in only a few minutes.” He noticed Wisteria looking away, guiltily. “But,” Rai added. “Now, you’ve got a head start. You’ll be healed in half the time that it would’ve taken.”

“Half the time?” Fell echoed, a smile lighting his face. Rai smiled back.

“Still, keep the cast on for the next two days,” Rai said. “It shouldn’t hurt, but you should still be careful with it.”

“Thanks,” Fell said, looking at Wisteria.

“You’re welcome,” Rai said.

“Yeah,” Wisteria added.

Aisling passed by their table and cast a Probe spell to check their handiwork. “Well done Ravin...and Raven.”

Rai glanced at Wisteria, and she rolled her eyes.

Fell wasn’t sure he’d understood what just happened, but he thanked them again and slid off the bed, preparing to leave. He had only gotten a few steps before Rai called after him.

“Fell, before you go...can I ask you something?”

Fell nodded.

“Would you rather be treated by somebody named Wisteria or Raven?”

“Wisteria, of course,” Fell said, glancing back at the pretty girl who had healed his arm. Rai smiled triumphantly, and Wisteria adopted her all-too-familiar scowl as Fell rushed out of the Infirmary.

~*~

There was only one class that every student at Eastridge took, regardless of major. Even though it meant a chance to see the Princess, Rai was dreading it. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that he would spend the entire time running. First-Year Conditioning took place a few hours before dinner each day, and it consisted almost entirely of laps around the campus.

When he arrived at the Coliseum, he found the entire first-year class assembled. After a few stretches, Halden sent them all running laps around the outer perimeter of the school.

Warriors ran with ten-pound weights evenly distributed to simulate armor, and Thieves and Mages were lucky enough to have nothing, though some of the Thieves were all making an effort to run silently and stay in the shadows. Rai figured it was an old habit. Rai kept pace with Nox and Quin, not quite daring to drop back to where the noble ladies were clustered.

“Find your key yet, Ravin?” Quin joked.

Rai gave a nonchalant shrug. “Haven’t needed it.”

“How are you getting into Drop Tower?” Nox asked.

“I have my ways,” Rai said.

Nox snorted. “So you’ve given up trying to get it back?”

Quin laughed. “I guess Ravin knows when he’s beat.”

Rai laughed good-naturedly with them, then picked up his pace. Nox and Quin tried to keep up with him, but he quickly outpaced them. They might be better Thieves, Rai conceded, but at least he was the better runner.

After the first few miles, most of the students began grumbling, but Rai found that the running cleared his head. He was used to going on runs, so he was able to keep up an aggressive pace without getting too out of breath.

It was a long run around the outside wall of the school. By the time everyone had made it back, Rai was ready for a break, but when Halden dismissed the other classes, he held the Clerics back, and Aisling stepped forward.

“Each day, along with Conditioning,” Aisling told her exhausted students, “Clerics have additional Shielding training. I believe you’re all familiar with the Shield Rune. Every Cleric should be able to cast this in her sleep. All the healing in the world won’t do much good if you’re Blasted to pieces by an attacking Mage while you’re in the middle of the bone-fusing charm.”

Aisling demonstrated the Shield Rune and waited until everyone proved they could cast it. Then she turned to the obstacle course behind her in the Coliseum.

“You’ll be going through this course with your lab partners. Take turns pretending to be injured, and Shielding your wounded teammate as you carry them to safety. For the purposes of this exercise, assume that your side is retreating, and staying to heal is not an option.”

Rai found Wisteria toward the back of the pack. She was clearly still out of breath from the running. “Ladies first?” he asked.

Wisteria looked dubiously at him. “You don’t even look tired,” Wisteria accused. “And you probably weigh twice as much as I do.”

Rai laughed. “It’s not my fault you’re short, though it is convenient.” He swept her into his arms, holding her against his chest.

Wisteria blushed and squirmed uncomfortably. “Don’t you need a hand free for casting the Shield Rune?” she pointed out.

Rai looked around at the other teams; most of the “victims” had been thrown over their partners’ shoulders. But then Aisling signaled for them to begin, and it was too late. Rai ran forward at a good pace, easily outdistancing the other teams.

“Shouldn’t you be Shielding?” Wisteria asked.

“Shielding from what?”

Just then, a fireball flew past them, missing by inches. It slammed into a tree behind them. The impact of the attack threw them both forward onto the ground.

“See, a Shield would’ve been useful right then,” Wisteria grumbled, wiping the dirt off her.

“Fine,” Rai said, hoisting her over his shoulder this time.

But before he could take a step, Aisling called out, “Ravin, you’re dead. It’s Raven’s turn.”

“Delightful.” Wisteria glared at him. “I’m holding you personally responsible for this. If you had listened to me—”

“Shouldn’t you be rescuing me right now?” Rai said, setting her on the ground and falling unhelpfully at her feet. “For all you know, my leg was just blown off, and you have to carry me to safety.”

“Right,” Wisteria said rolling her eyes. “Couldn’t have lost an *arm* instead, huh?”

“The purpose of the exercise is for you to carry me,” Rai reminded her with a grin, putting his hands behind his head.

“I would kick you if Aisling weren’t watching,” Wisteria told him, and it occurred to Rai that she might not realize he was teasing her. Funny, most girls seemed to enjoy being teased.

Wisteria grabbed Rai’s arm and attempted to heave him forward. After a second of straining, she gave up, and instead concentrated her efforts on throwing a Shield into place to deflect the incoming barrage of fireballs.

“This is impossible,” she said through gritted teeth. “We’re pinned down.”

Rai looked around. Everyone else also seemed to be stuck in the onslaught. Then Aisling's voice cut through the chaos.

"Second-years, that's enough," she called, and immediately the attack stopped.

"So the second-years are using us for target practice?" Rai observed.

"How enjoyable," Wisteria said, sitting down hard on the ground, seemingly unbothered by the dirt.

"Not bad for your first day, but we'll have to work on actually getting the wounded out of the range of fire," Aisling told them with a smile. "Now that's all for this class. Make sure you rest tonight. You've had a long day, and you'll be at it again tomorrow."

~*~

The unfortunate thing about roommates was that at the end of the day, there was no avoiding them. Averi was sitting on her bed when Wisteria returned after Cleric class. Wisteria supposed she might as well get this over with.

"It was unintentional," Wisteria said without any greeting.

Averi looked up, startled. "What?"

"Combat Casting today. It was unintentional and entirely my partner's fault. If Vane was half as good as he says he is, he would've returned the Water Orb without a problem. I wasn't aiming for you."

"Oh. Right," Averi agreed. Wisteria hadn't actually apologized, but Averi seemed to appreciate that she was at least *trying* to. "Next time, I'll try not to stand behind your target," Averi said with a smile.

Wisteria was relieved. This had gone surprisingly well. If her roommate could forgive her for dousing her on the first day of classes and even joke about it, maybe Wisteria could get used to having her around.

~*~

Rai hated to skip dinner, but a glance at his class schedule, and he remembered: *Rudimentary Stealth*, his first Thief class started at the seventh hour. He was grateful they had given him that much to start with, although admittedly the writing had appeared in code that he had to decipher.

Unfortunately, there was no mention of a classroom. Rai looked around and nearly jumped when he saw a shadow flitting in the corner. A shadow on a shadow—Rai could only guess it was a fellow Thief student sneaking to class.

Slinging his book bag over his shoulder, Rai rushed after the blur. He followed it around the rows of classrooms and into the Sparring Grounds, where he finally saw a semi-circle of black-clad figures standing in the dark.

“Welcome to your first class, Rai Ravin,” a voice said from the center of the semi-circle.

Rai approached, and in the dim moonlight, he saw the slender form of Nianzu. He felt a brief surge of pride at actually finding the class.

“Check your pockets,” Nianzu said casually, as though reading the exuberance on his face.

With dismay, Rai rifled through his pockets, realizing that his coins, papers, and even books from his book bag were missing.

“Do you always come to class barefoot?” Nianzu asked softly.

Rai looked down and realized that his shoes were missing.

“Fine work,” Nianzu said to the upperclassmen Thieves who emerged from the shadows, dumping Rai’s possessions onto the ground in front of him. Most wore intimidating masks, but one blonde girl wore her face bare. She winked at Rai as she returned his shoes.

Rai did his best to appear unruffled and stuffed his coins and notes hurriedly into pockets. He heard one of the upperclassmen click his tongue at the ease of this target, and he turned red. At least he didn’t have to be too embarrassed, though—looking around, Rai observed that he was not the only first-year who had been targeted. As the upperclassmen stepped back, they revealed a whole group of self-conscious, first-years who were also replacing various articles of clothing. One poor boy had to suffer several minutes topless since his shirt had been taken as well.

“Now that all the novices have been rounded up, we shall begin,” Nianzu said, interrupting any murmurs that were circulating. The class fell silent. “This is *Rudimentary Stealth*, and I am Professor Nianzu. I am pleased to see that most of our first-years have made it to class today.”

“Yeah, barely,” Rai heard one of the other first-years, a boy with a shock of white hair, retort loudly.

If Nianzu heard the boy, she ignored him. “This class covers stealth basics and will help you improve your ability to be seen only when you want to be, an important skill for any Thief. Unlike your other Thief classes, Rudimentary Stealth will always meet after dinner at this time, and you need bring nothing, lest it be stolen from under your nose.”

“Professor, will we always meet here?”

It was the same boy who had spoken impudently before. His question prompted a laugh among the upperclassmen, which Nianzu snuffed with a pointed glare.

“Since you are all first-years, I will spell this out clearly: the classroom will change. It is up to you to find out where it will be,” Nianzu said. “Thieves rarely find it advantageous to convene in the same place at the same time. You will come to learn this when you play The Game.”

“The Game, Professor?” Again, the boy with white hair.

Nianzu glowered at him. “That’s enough out of you, Lyre Cross, or I will ensure you have no shoes for a week.”

The boy winced, and Nianzu continued, “For the first half of the year, you will have mentors to guide you through your work.”

Rai gave a sigh of relief.

“Upperclassmen will be assigned to you to monitor your progress and report back to us.”

Rai felt his stomach drop. That didn’t sound helpful at all. What part of that was ‘guiding’?

“Grades are determined by your ability to complete assignments within the given parameters. Missions and assignments will be given as part of your marks. In fact, your first assignment begins now; by the next class, you are each to discern the identity of the Thief or Thieves who will mentor you,” Nianzu stopped to look over each of the first-years’ gaping faces. “I wish you the best of luck.”

With those words, Nianzu gestured, and in a flash of smoke, professor and upperclassmen alike disappeared.

Rai groaned. He had just considered himself lucky to find the classroom and now, this? There were going to be few triumphs in the Thief major it seemed.

~*~

It was a relief to get back to Drop Tower, where at least Rai knew his shoes would stay firmly on his feet. As he walked into the dormitory's common Library, he found most of the first year residents scattered, half-studying and half-chattering about the first day. The Thieves were in one corner, but since Rai still hadn't gotten his key back, he didn't feel much like associating with them. There were a few girls that he had talked to scattered about the room, and Averi was seated at the center with a group of nobles, but tonight he was here to make some progress with the roommate. It didn't much surprise him that Wisteria was off in a corner by herself, or that she failed to look up when he sat down next to her and cleared his throat.

"Studying already?" he asked, leaning over her book. He glanced at the page she was open to—there was an elaborate mark at the center of the page with a description next to it. "The Reflection Rune, capable of..."

She shifted so that he couldn't read over her shoulder. "Don't you have your own books?"

"I'll study later," Rai said. He turned to survey the room and observed, "Seems like it's really crowded in here. I never would have expected a Library to be so popular."

"It's not the Library that's popular," Wisteria said, flipping another page in her book.

Rai chuckled. It was true. Everyone seemed to have an eye on the center of the room. With good reason.

All of the higher nobles—the ladies who wore gowns and studied mage-work—were clustered at a table, drawing the attention of everyone around them. Of course, Averi was at the center, and next to her, was the most stunning girl Rai had ever seen. From the commanding way she looked over the Library as though it were her own personal domain, Rai could only guess she was well aware of the staggering impact she had on the men in the room.

“That must be Lady Annalise Emberlynn,” he said.

“You know her?” Wisteria said, in a tone that made it an accusation.

“Half the second-year boys are in love with her,” he said. “And, nearly all of the first-years, as well.”

Looking at her now, he could understand why. With delicate yet striking features and a fashionable figure, Annalise commanded her circle with a self-assuredness that was as attractive as it was intimidating. Her golden blonde hair trailed elegantly down her back, held in place by two ornate sapphire clips that matched her eyes. Rai watched her delicately smooth the folds of her cream-colored gown, which fell just within the bounds of tasteful modesty. When she spoke, the other girls fell silent.

“My roommate’s over there,” Wisteria said conversationally. “She could probably introduce you, if you’re interested.”

“I’m not quite ready to join the ranks of nobles chasing after those girls.”

Wisteria looked moderately amused. They watched a group of well-dressed noble men edging towards the circle of girls.

“That’s the third group tonight,” Wisteria said, making a tally mark at the corner of her book and completely ignoring Rai’s comment.

Two of the noblemen preoccupied themselves with vying for Annalise’s attention, but the other four turned to Averi.

“Watch how she handles this,” Wisteria said, as if they were at some sort of tournament. “She gives them all the exact same look for the exact same amount of time, and says, from what I can tell, nearly the exact same thing, yet somehow they each walk away looking extraordinarily pleased.”

Wisteria proved correct: Averi addressed each of the boys in a calculated manner that measured out her sentences, her smile, and even how long she held their gaze before politely nodding and moving onto the next boy. She listened to what they said and replied, but only with polite indifference.

“It looks almost painful,” Rai said. “But, I suppose that’s diplomacy for you.”

“I suppose,” Wisteria echoed, but her words were drowned out by the tolling of the ninth hour and the beginning of curfew. With a groan, the students began clearing out of the Library, heading towards their rooms.

“Do you need an escort back to your room?” Rai asked, exaggerating the offer by extending his hand and bowing at the waist.

“Not if you’re going to act like that,” Wisteria told him bluntly. By the time he looked up, she was already walking away. But when she turned to glance back at him, he consoled himself with the fact that she was smiling.

Chapter 3 – Majors and Minors

Fell Farmington couldn't help marveling at the ease with which his life fell into the painful and hazardous routine of the Warrior major. Half of his classes—*Grabs and Grappling* and *Weapons Work*—taught him how to fight and how to defend himself, assigning merciless amounts of book reading in addition to the lectures. On top of that, there were the mandatory practice hours, which Fell insisted on supplementing with his own extra hours in the stable, where no one would see him blundering through the mechanics of the moves. The other half of Fell's classes—*Sparring I* and *Unarmed Combat Basics*—was little more than a chance for the upperclassmen to pummel him senseless and send him to the Infirmary.

But the bright side of that was getting to see Wisteria and Rai, whom Fell had begun to regard as his only two friends at Eastridge. Whenever he came to them with various wounds, they always, *always* patched him up. The novelty of that, perhaps more than anything else, kept Fell going back to class each day while classmate after classmate dropped out or transferred to another major. Before coming to Eastridge, Fell had never seen a healer before, much less a Cleric with real magic. On the farm, *that* had always been the worst part of getting hurt, knowing that for the next few weeks, the painful bruises or broken fingers would throb during every moment of his work baling hay and looking after the animals.

Now, however, he faced his injuries with anticipation for the healing to come. What did it matter how much it hurt for a few minutes when it would be gone in the blink of an eye as soon as Wisteria and Rai were there to take care of him?

With the two of them joking with him and even arguing over how best to help him, Fell didn't give a second thought to the fact that everyone perpetually expected him to be the next to

wash-out of the Warrior major. All Fell knew was that this was his dream, and he wasn't going to give it up, not over a few bruises and busted bones.

So day after day, Fell surprised everyone but himself by showing up and facing down Torrent's bullies in *Sparring I* or *Unarmed Combat Basics* with a look on his face as though he thoroughly expected to, at any moment, land a punch or dodge a kick, and find himself victorious.

"Don't know how you do it," Javen said grimly one day, when they were about to depart for another pain-filled session of *Sparring I*. "I don't know if I can go today." He stood up then sat down on his bed again, shaking slightly.

"What's wrong?" Fell asked. "Are you sick? Or hurt?"

"No, you idiot, I just don't... don't want to get beaten up again today. I can't... I can't just walk into it the way you do. I don't *want* to get hurt anymore!"

Fell awkwardly patted Javen on the back. This was the most they had spoken in the past two weeks beyond reminding each other when it was time for class or asking about homework assignments. Javen always seemed so tough, but Fell supposed that yesterday had probably been Javen's first experience with a broken bone, and having Torrent break five of Javen's ribs was probably the worst way to experience it.

"Torrent and his lot are always rougher than the others," Fell said. "Just try and stay away from them when the choosing starts."

Javen shook his head. "How do you do it, Fell? How do you keep going back? One of them *always* makes sure to choose you, and you get it twice as bad as anyone else."

Fell shrugged. He had noticed, but complaining would do little good. If he couldn't take it, he didn't belong in the Warrior major. It was as simple as that. He was about to explain it to

Javen, but he didn't think he could find the words to really say it in any way that would make sense. Instead, he said, "I've got the least experience, don't I? So I've got the most to prove. Come on. We'll be late if we don't go now."

But Javen didn't stand.

"If you miss a day, you're washed out," Fell reminded him, grabbing his arm and pulling him up.

"I know, Fell, I know!"

"Just one more time, then. If I can do it one more time, so can you."

Javen gave a half-smile and sighed. "Just one more time then."

At the Sparring Grounds, Javen rejoined Cai and the rest of his friends while Fell remained at the outskirts of the class. There, as usual, Averi came up to him with a smile and a wave.

"Ready for another day?" she asked.

"Someday, you've got to tell me your secret for how you never seem to get a scratch," Fell teased.

Averi made a face. "I'm starting to wish it wasn't this way. I can't walk two steps without getting a scathing look from one of the first-years. I've half a mind to think taking a punch now and then wouldn't be entirely bad..."

Fell shook his head, eyes wide. "Averi! Don't ever say that!" The idea of Averi going through what he took for a routine day made him pale. While he couldn't have deluded himself into counting the Princess as one of his friends, she was always nice to him and imagining her getting hurt twisted his stomach into knots.

A smile tugged at the corners of Averi's mouth, and Fell was surprised to realize that he was the cause.

"Don't worry, Fell. I think it's pretty clear that I'm off-limits," she reassured him. "But what good is any of it doing? Outside these walls, there's a war. If I end up in battle, the Serathian soldiers aren't going to show the same leniency."

Fell didn't want to think of the war, of Averi ending up in battle, but he couldn't very well tell her that, so he didn't reply.

By then, the clock tower had begun to toll, and by the time it finished, the second-years had picked their first-years. It was already the fourth week of class, and the number of first-years had dropped so there were more pairs than groups of three. Fell didn't even try to avoid Rakam as the older boy made a straight line for him. Fell did glance around to make sure Javen had indeed ended up with one of the Warriors outside of Torrent's group. He was reassured by seeing his roommate paired with a quiet brown-haired boy who never dealt out more than bruises.

"Not paying attention, First-Year?" Rakam snapped, shoving Fell over to one of the more hazardous-looking rings. The gritty sand covering the ground was scattered with prickly plants that jutted out with sharp spines that Fell had found out were mildly poisonous, creating a blotchy, itchy rash wherever they managed to puncture the skin.

But Fell tried not to let his recognition of this particularly cruel choice of grounds register as more than grim determination. He saw Rakam expectantly searching his face, and Fell was oddly pleased that the second-year didn't seem to find what he was looking for.

"Ready to start?" Rakam asked, punctuating his question with a punch that, had it connected, would have probably left Fell doubled over in pain, as it had so many times before. However, to Rakam's surprise, Fell dodged.

Rakam glared at him, annoyed. “Who said you could dodge?”

Then Rakam kicked him, hard, in the stomach, and he crumpled on his side, trying to protect himself from the onslaught of blows.

~*~

“Back again?” Rai asked as Fell limped into the Infirmary. Rai supposed he shouldn’t be surprised. Since that first day, he and Wisteria had been continually treating Fell’s injuries, which seemed to get progressively worse. This time, he was nursing a wounded arm and favoring his right leg. His face was covered in bruises, and it looked like his nose had been broken again.

“Just couldn’t stay away,” Fell said, with a lopsided grin that revealed a few missing teeth.

Wisteria shook her head. “This will take the rest of the hour. How do you manage to get into these situations?”

“They just sort of find me,” Fell said. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to make more work for you.”

Rai laughed. “It’s not any trouble. If anything, you’re giving us a lot to practice on. Wisteria’s just about perfected her bone fusing charm. How about I start on the teeth and you look at his leg?”

“The leg? I healed his leg last time,” Wisteria protested.

“Thus, you should already know what to do,” Rai smiled, already flipping through his book to find the section on replacing teeth.

“I want to fix the teeth,” said Wisteria.

“Don’t worry. I’ve already found the page,” Rai said. Broken teeth were a rarity, and he wasn’t about to let this chance slip through his fingers.

“So you can hold it open for me,” Wisteria said. “You got to fix his broken thumb last week. It’s my turn this time.”

Rai thought about protesting, but she had a point. Besides, the probability of Fell getting his teeth knocked out again was...well... relatively decent actually. With resignation, Rai handed Wisteria the book open to the right page. He watched her out of the corner of his eye as he started tracing the all-too-familiar runes for bone-fusing over Fell’s leg.

Wisteria went about healing him in her usual, brisk manner, though she did double-check the runes before she wrote them out over Fell’s lips.

It did indeed take the rest of the hour to completely patch up Fell. But, by the time it was done, he considered it well worth it to see Fell with all of his teeth back in place, all of his bruises faded, and his familiar, painfully optimistic smile back on his face.

“See you tomorrow,” Fell said.

“Hopefully not, right?” Rai prodded.

Fell smiled all the brighter with this encouragement. “You’re right. Maybe I’ll see you the day after.”

~*~

Once again, Averi returned to her room after sparring class without a single injury. Disheartened, she lay down on her bed, trying not to see Fell’s beating every time she closed her eyes.

Thoughtfully, she held up the silver bracelet on her wrist. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she started to write out an intricate rune. She was nearly finished when the magic became unfocused and fizzled. She frowned, trying again. She thought she had the lines

right, but when she cast it, the magic came apart. It was frustrating, exhausting work, made worse by the fact that she had never gotten it right.

It was almost a relief when she heard Wisteria's familiar voice breaking through the silence.

"Of course I repaired them instead of re-growing them. He had the teeth right there in his hand! I think..."

Wisteria's voice got progressively closer. And louder.

"But, according to my *four years* of healing study, repairing the teeth doesn't make the teeth half as strong as just re-growing them."

That was Rai's voice.

Averi sat up and jumped off the bed, which would hardly have been proper and perched rigidly on her chair.

"According to our *textbook*, it's just a myth. I'll *show* you." There was a jostle of the door, and Wisteria flung it open. "It's right here."

"Good evening, Averi," Rai said, his tone changing to a much different one than what he had been using with Wisteria in the hallway. "You must have boundless patience to live with Wisteria. I only see her for a few hours in class, and she nearly drives me to my wit's end each time."

Averi laughed. "At least Thieves don't have partners."

"Here it is," Wisteria interrupted, producing the book. Inscribed with the title *Healing Practices for Practical Healing*, it had the image of the Cleric Allora's wyvern serpent engraved across the cover in copper-colored ink.

Rai took it from her and read, *“While it has largely been held that re-growing teeth creates a stronger end result than repairing teeth, recent evidence shows that the condensed time in which the teeth are re-grown weakens the finished product. This suggests that further research is needed to definitively state which is preferable.”*

“See?” Wisteria challenged him.

“It doesn’t say anything,” Rai pointed out.

“Exactly. Neither is better than the other,” Wisteria insisted. Rai shook his head. The clock tower tolled, signaling the beginning of the dinner hour.

“All right, all right,” he said.

“You’re giving up easier than I expected,” Wisteria said. She grabbed the book back from him and snapped it shut.

“Giving up isn’t the same as knowing when the great Wisteria Ling is being too stubborn to listen to reason. Maybe we can call it a draw and go to dinner,” he said, and turning to Averi, he added, “As our objective third party, it’s your call.”

“Dinner sounds good to me,” Averi agreed.

The three of them began walking toward the dining commons. Averi hung back with Wisteria and let Rai take the lead.

“Who were you healing today that had broken teeth?” Averi asked, suspicious. Only one person’s teeth had been knocked out, and that was...

“Fell,” Wisteria said promptly.

“This poor kid who keeps getting beaten up almost every day,” Rai said, jumping in before Wisteria could explain.

“Yes, Fell. I know him.”

“That’s right,” Wisteria said. “You’re a Warrior minor.”

“Really? I’ve never seen you in the Infirmary,” Rai said. “And I’m fairly sure we’ve gone through everyone in that class.”

“It seems like no one will spar against me.”

“Strange, we’ve seen girls come through. Is it because...”

“Obviously, it’s because she’s a princess,” Wisteria interrupted.

Rai nodded. “That makes sense. But I didn’t figure *everyone* would know. Though most nobles would make the connection from your name and how you look,” he said, gesturing vaguely to the trademark platinum-blond hair and amber eyes that were common in the royal family.

“Not everyone recognized me, but the people who did made sure everyone else knew,” Averi said, thinking of how Torrent had quickly spread the word through his group of bullies that the Princess wasn’t to be touched for fear of reprisal.

There was a pause in the conversation when they reached the dining hall and grabbed trays. Looking over the food laid out for dinner, Rai asked, “So, how do you enjoy the Warrior minor?”

“It’s terrible. I’m not particularly fond of watching people get hurt, especially poor Fell. They seem to really have it out for him,” Averi said. “I haven’t the slightest idea why.”

Wisteria made an indelicate noise. “Most likely because they can get away with it. He’s not exactly able to defend himself, is he?”

“But it’s not even a matter of just getting away with it. It’s what we’re *supposed* to do—beat each other within an inch of our lives, get healed, and return to do it again the next day.”

Averi stopped, as they all took their respective seats at one of the dining tables. “Don’t you think there’s something wrong with that?”

“Yes, actually, I do,” Rai said seriously. “That’s why I’m not a Warrior minor. What did you think you were signing up for? You’re learning how to hurt people and how to take getting hurt in the process.”

Averi thought back to her daydreams of heroically swinging a sword at faceless bandits in her quest to aid helpless villagers. “I suppose I didn’t think much about the people I’d be hurting.”

“But if you didn’t hurt people, we wouldn’t have anyone to practice on,” Wisteria said thoughtfully, polishing off one of her three apples. “Not, of course, that it redeems the Warrior classes any,” she added.

Rai resisted the urge to smile. “So why *did* you want to be a Warrior?”

Averi shrugged. “When I was little, my brothers would tell me stories of the Warrior Ren and how he defended the weak and the poor and helped people. I wanted to be like him and his Mage, Kaethe. Together they did so much good in the world...or so the stories go.”

“But they always leave out how many people get hurt along the way, don’t they?” Rai said. “At any rate, if you really dislike being a Warrior, you should consider changing minors. You know, there’s always the other end of it, the Cleric minor.”

I’m not ready to be that useless, Averi thought to say, then realized she was talking to two Clerics. *I’m definitely not ready to be that tactless.*

“I’m not ready to make so drastic a shift,” Averi said, finally. “I’ve never really found Cleric work that intriguing to begin with. You would, for instance, never find me arguing about the best way to repair teeth.”

“Regrowth,” Rai supplied automatically, earning a scowl from Wisteria.

“Truthfully,” Averi said, stalling Wisteria’s retort, “I was hoping for something a little more exciting.”

“Your only option left is Thief,” Wisteria said dryly.

“I *guess* ‘exciting’ is the word for it,” Rai shrugged. “Though I’m probably not the best person to ask.”

“What do you generally do?”

“I’m not sure I can tell you that information. Very secretive, us Thieves,” Rai said

“I thought you couldn’t even *find* half your classes,” Wisteria muttered.

Averi smothered her laughter as Rai shot Wisteria a look.

“As I was saying,” he continued, “I *can* tell you the classes haven’t gotten much further than embarrassing the first-years.”

“I guess I’ll give it a chance,” Averi said, although she was somewhat disappointed. Even the Clerics had the historical Allora to admire, but Thieves? There weren’t any great tales of legendary thieves. “Do you think it’s too late to change?”

“Too late to change what?” Lady Annalise Emberlynn asked, sitting down next to Averi. She was followed by Calla-Lily, Peony, and Celia. Trailing behind them was Lady Nadine, a quiet but pretty first-year who had been added to their ranks.

Averi winced at the intrusion of the nobles on this casual conversation. She watched her roommate and her Thief for how they would react, but to her relief Wisteria only blankly took another bite of her apple, and Rai gave a small wave to the noble girls. Annalise turned to Averi expectantly, and Averi remembered that Annalise had asked her a question.

“My minor,” Averi replied. Even though she didn’t feel like discussing it with a committee, any attempt to cover their conversation could be interpreted as a direct insult. “But I believe I’ve settled the matter. Allow me to introduce…”

“Wraith Ravin of the Ravinswood family, correct?” Annalise interrupted, and without waiting for a reply, added, “He’s been helping little Nadine on her Cleric homework. He’s been quite the devoted teacher, I hear.”

Nadine blushed, and Averi noticed that Nadine looked everywhere but at Rai and nibbled at her slice of roasted quail.

“Of course, it’s always a pleasure working with someone who understands the material so quickly. I’m sure that by next week, she’ll be teaching *me*,” Rai said with a wink at Nadine, who had accidentally made eye contact. Wisteria gave him a strange look.

“Where is all this modesty coming from?” Wisteria asked him quietly, but her question was drowned out by Lady Annalise forcing the topic back to Averi.

Wisteria rolled her eyes and left the table as Lady Annalise said, “Can we expect to see you in the Cleric classes soon?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Averi said. “Tomorrow I intend to switch to the Thief minor.”

Annalise set down the tea she had been sipping. “The *Thief* minor.”

Averi couldn’t miss the surprise in Annalise’s voice. However, Rai deftly maneuvered the topic back to his Cleric work with Nadine.

Though none of the other girls brought it up again for the rest of the night, Averi was almost sure that there was something different about the way they looked at her.

~*~

Averi sat primly across from Headmistress Veraniel Sansdath as she flipped through a stack of parchment. Averi could only guess that it was her paperwork for transferring from the Warrior minor to the Thief minor. She had filled out all of the necessary requests. Why she would be called into the Headmistress's office for this was beyond her. She was about to ask when Sansdath spoke.

"The Thief program," Sansdath said to Averi, in a tone that suggested she was almost thinking out loud, "has always been the subject of some scrutiny. Hardly a year goes by without some noble or another protesting that we're teaching little more than common pick-pocketing and preparing entire generations to go straight into a life of crime.

"But," she continued with a slight smile, "while pick-pocketing is one of our courses, we have always managed to defend ourselves with the staunch reply that there are skills unique to thievery that mean the difference between life and death, which, as you know, is the principle that this school is founded on. If the difference between a surviving group of students and a dead group of students is that a Thief managed to sneak behind the enemy and steal a magical weapon or incapacitate a skilled mage, then it's well worth risking moral ambiguity."

Averi looked down. Of course. *Moral ambiguity*. It seemed like Sansdath was no different than Annalise and her noble ladies, concerned more with propriety than education.

"Do you have any questions, *Averi*?"

Though Sansdath called her by her assumed name, Averi never doubted that the woman knew her real identity. "If you think I haven't given thought to how my choice of minor would reflect on my station, then you are mistaken. I have given the matter much consideration and am prepared to..."

Sansdath dismissed the remainder of Averi's speech with a wave of her hand. "Before you get yourself in any deeper, Averi, let me tell you that this is the speech *all* Thief majors and minors are given the day they arrive at Eastridge."

"I... I hadn't realized. My apologies." Averi fought to keep her breathing normal so the blush that was betraying her wouldn't spread farther across her cheeks. She must have seemed like such an arrogant fool.

Sansdath chuckled. "You know that our policy is strictly against giving anyone special treatment, Averi, and that means we won't make it *harder* for you either."

"Thank you, headmistress," Averi managed to say.

Sansdath accepted her thanks with a nod as she noted the change in Averi's file and quickly traced out the runes over the top of the paper that would notify the necessary teachers with a copy of the paper on their desks:

Please update courses accordingly.

Dropped: Warrior Minor

Averi Rysten, Mage Major, Thief Minor

Chapter 4 – Thieving

Averi waited nervously in her room, pacing back and forth restlessly, glad that Wisteria wasn't around to see her crossing the invisible line that divided their room. Even though the two roommates ate more meals together than apart, Wisteria still shot Averi a stern glare every time she stepped onto Wisteria's side of the room.

Averi glanced out her window at the clock tower and halted mid-step. It was only five short minutes before her first Thief class was supposed to begin. Rai had promised her that he would meet her at her room and go with her, but he was nowhere in sight.

There was a sharp tapping at the window, and Averi jumped. She opened the latch to the window and pushed it open, letting Rai in.

“Don't you ever use the door?”

“This way, you'll always know it's me,” he said with a smile. “Come on.”

They walked out of Drop Tower and down to the stables. “Are you sure there isn't anything else I should know?” Averi pressed, for perhaps the third time that day.

“Yes, yes,” Rai assured her. “We've hardly covered anything. Our first assignment was to decode who our mentors are. The second was to plant hundreds of seedling trees around the campus... What that has to do with thieving, I've no idea, but we were instructed not to get caught. The third assignment was to find one of the Thief passages that runs through the school, but only a couple of people were able to locate any of them.”

Averi frowned, wondering how she'd possibly be able to catch up. Secret passages? Planting trees? None of this made any sense.

They reached the stables just as the clock was striking. In the back, in the shadows, they found the Thief students crouched and silent, waiting for Nianzu. As Averi and Rai took their places, the Thief professor dropped down from above to stand at the center of the group.

“By now, you all know the entrance and exit points of at least one Thief passage,” she said. “It’s time for your first real mission to begin. From now until the next class, you are to choose a target and follow them. Learn all you can about your subject. During that time, you will take from them one precious object without their knowledge.”

Nianzu snapped her fingers and pages of parchment appeared in each student’s hand. “These are the rules for what objects may or may not be taken.”

Averi glanced down at it.

Section I: Value

- A. Items taken may not be valued at a market price exceeding ten (10) gold.
- B. Items may not be money of any sort, foreign or coin of the realm.
- C. Items may not be valued at less than seven (7) coppers.

Section II: Sentimental Value

- A. Items *must* be of some value to the individual from whom they are stolen from.
- B. Items taken *must not* be of a level ten (10) Sentimental Value (see appendix for Sentimental Value scale).

It went on like that for pages. Apparently, the headmistress hadn’t exaggerated the concern for propriety as far as the Thief classes were concerned.

“See that you strictly follow these rules,” Nianzu said sharply. “The penalty for breaking the rules of any assignment is required attendance next year in *The Ethics of Thieving* class.”

Everyone seemed to shudder at the idea, and Averi got the feeling that each Thief would be more than careful to strictly adhere to the many-paged document.

“Yes, Lyre Cross? You have a question?”

“He always has a question,” Rai whispered to Averi, pointing to a white-haired boy in the front of the class.

“How do we know how attached the target is to an object?” Lyre asked.

“Because you’ll be following their every move for *an entire week*, Lyre Cross. If you can’t discern what’s important to someone by then, surely you don’t belong in this class.”

Lyre looked sheepish.

“Further,” Nianzu continued, “in addition to the rules on objects, there are a few rules concerning the subjects you track. Your target should not become aware of your presence at any time during the tracking. You will be watched closely by your mentor, who will deduct points if your target identifies you.” Nianzu paused to let that sink in, then continued, “Don’t get caught. That is all.”

The darkness of the stable seemed to melt around Nianzu until she was entirely obscured. When it dissolved, she was gone.

“Well, we have our orders,” Rai said to Averi, who still looked like she was in moderate stages of disbelief at the class, the teacher, and the entire assignment. “Let’s get to work.”

~*~

Five hours into his Thief assignment and Rai Ravin was no closer to figuring out Wisteria Ling than he had been that morning.

Wisteria rose early, ate breakfast alone, and brought all her books to class with her. She braided her hair when bored, and liked to write her name—her *real* name—in the margins of her textbooks during lecture.

Her middle name was one he rarely heard used, but it was pretty.

And, she only ate apples.

Textbooks! Apples! He could hardly steal these for the assignment. None of his observations were hinting at any object of sentimental value that Rai would be able to turn in. He had already followed her for most of today. What more could he do?

“Pay *attention*,” Wisteria snapped. Rai gave her a startled look as she gestured to the mortar and pestle he was holding. The white treble-root in the bowl looked unimpressively intact. “We have to put that in next.”

“I *am* paying attention,” said Rai stiffly, crushing the root as if his life depended on it.

“Oh, really? You’re grinding the wrong herb.” She cocked her head, causing her braid to swing precariously near the fire under their pot. “Treble root is red.”

Rai considered her statement before saying, “Only in the north. If you’re in central Easden, it’s white.”

“Really?”

He nodded warily, wondering if she was asking to verify the fact or to argue against it. He remembered she was a Cleric major and taking one extra Cleric class than he was. That explained why she constantly felt the need to challenge him, even though technically he still had four more years’ experience, which topped anything she could have learned in the last few weeks.

“Interesting.” She inspected the white root powder he was putting into the pot. “That’s new. But I’ve never been to central Easden before, so it makes sense.”

“Never?” Rai grabbed a towel to dry his hands off. Treble-root always left chalky marks. “That’s strange.”

“Is it?” She sounded uninterested.

“That’s where the capital is. Most noble families have to travel there at some point, if only for the royal census,” Rai replied.

“I’m not from a noble family,” Wisteria said distractedly. “Did you already chop the fenule?”

“Uh, no.” His intuition nagged at him. “You’re not noble?”

“What led you to believe I was?”

“Uh,” Rai paused to think. Why had he assumed that? She was clearly used to schooling—probably in mage-work, since she didn’t bother to take notes in *Introductory Runes* and was considered very advanced in her combat-casting skills. He could attest to the fact she must have had experience with formal debate, and her annoying ability to quote her textbooks and manuscripts like she was holding them in front of her marked her as someone who was well read. That level of education told him she must be from either a wealthy or a very knowledgeable family.

But, schooling alone didn’t make her noble. Noble ladies weren’t normally taught the art of combat casting. The Shield charm he had witnessed her using in Combat Casting earlier today spoke of hours and hours of practice noble ladies simply didn’t have. Come to think of it, she didn’t dress or speak like any of the nobility *he* knew. The nobility didn’t wear their hair down like she did, and they didn’t speak with her candor. And, any noble lady worth her title would

have *died* if word had leaked out she had treated *Averis Rystendale*, the Emperor's *niece*, with any of the gruffness Wisteria used to handle *Averi*.

Unless that lady had that no notion of royal politics or diplomacy whatsoever.

Unless that lady was Wisteria Ling.

The knife she was waving at him caught his attention. "I realize I wasn't terribly clear when I said 'The fenule needs to be in there *now*, or we will fail this assignment', but, the fenule needs to be in there *now*, or I will personally ensure that..."

"Right." Rai Ravin dumped the over-chopped leaves into the pot and watched the poultice turn a faint green. "See? All better."

~*~

Fell had been putting off getting a job long enough. To get out of his bonded work on the farm, he had to send a sum of two silvers to his master every other month. The first payment had taken up what was left of his savings, and the second was due in a few weeks. Unfortunately, Fell had been so preoccupied with his Warrior classes that he hadn't managed to scrape together any money.

Now he needed to find a job fast.

His first thought was of the stable. He had worked with animals on the farm, though none as grand as the warhorses and battle mounts that the upperclassmen and faculty stabled at Eastridge.

Fell found the Stable Master in one of the horse stalls, currycombing a brown-spotted steed. The Stable Master was a short, brisk woman who wore her dark hair cropped short. At Fell's approach, she looked over at him, but didn't stop brushing the horse.

"Yes?" she prompted.

“My name is Fell, Stable Master,” he said, staring down at the straw on the ground as he spoke. “I’m... I’m looking for work.” He dared to glance up at her.

The woman swept her eyes over him, sizing him up. “You’ve worked with horses before?”

“Yes, Stable Master. Mostly with cows, but a couple horses.”

“My name is Sennia,” she informed him. “You’re a student here? What year?”

“First-year,” Fell said. He couldn’t bring himself to call her by her first name.

The woman snorted. “I don’t put much stock in hiring students, particularly not first-years. They don’t need the money, so they stop showing up when they decide classes or girls are more important...” She trailed off, taking in Fell’s patched and worn clothing.

“You’re bonded, aren’t you, boy?” she demanded.

Caught off-guard, Fell only nodded, his face burning with shame.

“There’re always a couple each year,” Sennia said, her voice softer. “And they do usually do good work.” With a sigh, she grabbed a nearby broom and thrust it at Fell. “The pay is twelve coppers a week for fifteen hours of work. You’ll work under Assistant Stable Master Lannen,” she said, pointing to a man in the back. “For today, clean out the stalls along the back wall. Before you leave, check in with Lannen. From now on, you’ll answer to him.”

Fell nodded quickly and took the broom. He went into the first stall and began sweeping. As he worked, he tried to add the figures in his head. At twelve coppers a week, he’d be able to pay the two silvers in a little over eight weeks...which was three weeks more than he had. Fell gulped.

Where could he get the rest of the money?

Maybe he could work extra hours.

“Watch where you’re sweeping that!” a familiar voice shouted.

Glancing up, Fell saw Cai standing in a cloud of dust and stray straw that Fell had just swept his way.

“Sorry,” Fell said, stepping back. “Are you here for... is this your horse?” he asked clumsily.

Cai coughed. “...Something like that.”

Fell realized that Cai also had a broom in his hand.

It took him a moment to understand that Cai must also be working here... And if Sennia had hired him, did that mean that Cai must also be a bonded laborer? Fell didn’t think it was possible. Cai was so confident. He knew so much about fighting. No one ever picked on him.

“Look,” Cai said. “This never happened, right, Farmington?”

“Uh, right,” Fell agreed.

“Neither of us was ever here.”

“Right.”

Cai gave him a short nod and moved on to clean out the next stall.

Fell went back to cleaning his stall, feeling a little better. At least he wasn’t in this alone.

After a few hours of work, it was nearly time for class. And Fell still hadn’t figured out how he’d get the extra coppers he needed to make his payment. Gathering his resolve, he approached the Assistant Stable Master.

“Not another one,” Lannen grumbled, spotting Fell. “Sennia’s getting too blasted soft.”

Fell ducked his head not knowing what to say.

“Okay, kid,” Lannen said, “let’s get a few things straight. I know every piece of equipment that’s in here so don’t think about stealing anything. And I know how long it takes to

muck out a stall or saddle a horse, so don't think you can take all day doing a couple simple things. And if you mistreat any of the animals, I'll see to it that you don't get a job anywhere on campus or in town for the rest of your life."

"Um, excuse me, sir?" Fell sensed this might not be the best time to ask, but his fear of missing his payment and being sent back to his bonded work prodded him to take the chance. "If it's not too much trouble, is there any way I could pick up a few extra hours this week?"

"Extra hours?" Lannen asked, squinting at him. "What for? Got a girl you're chasing after, and she can't wait to have some shiny trinket?"

"I've got a payment I need to make...to my master," Fell said reluctantly.

Lannen frowned. "I'll see what I can do for you. But don't expect to make a habit out of this."

"I won't. Thank you," Fell said. "Really, I..."

Lannen cut him off with a wave of his hand. "Be here at sun-up tomorrow."

Nodding, Fell turned to leave.

"And mind me, first-year," Lannen called after him, "you miss a single shift and you're gone."

~*~

Rai watched Wisteria choose a seat in the dining commons and sat himself at a distant table hidden in the shadows, where he could hopefully watch her without attracting her notice.

"Mind if I join you?"

Rai turned to the voice, recognizing the white-haired boy Nianzu liked to threaten from Thief class. His hair wasn't actually white, just painfully blonde, and the strangeness of his

features extended to his eyes, which were a curious shade of violet. He was slightly bigger than Rai, definitely taller. What was his name again? He tried to remember Nianzu's threats.

Right. Lyre Cross.

Rai nodded at the seat in front of him. "Go ahead."

"Thanks."

Rai held out a hand. "I'm—"

"Rai Ravin, right? Nianzu mentioned you." Lyre shook his hand.

"She was at my interview."

"She's at everyone's interview," Lyre said, sitting.

Rai considered him a long moment. "I think this may be the first time I've ever eaten with someone in the Thief department."

Lyre gave him a wide grin. "Me too, actually. I'm hopeless at figuring out where the Thieves' table is nowadays."

"There's a Thieves' table?" Rai wondered if that's where Averi was because he hadn't seen her since the last Stealth class. Come to think of it, he hadn't seen Nox or Quin lately, but it wasn't as though he missed *their* company.

"Supposedly. I haven't figured out if it's truth or just a mean joke to poke fun at us first-years." Lyre attacked his steak with vigor. "Of course, there used to be one, so the chance it's true is equally the same as it not being true."

Rai raised an eyebrow. "Shouldn't you know? Haven't you lived here your whole life?"

It was common knowledge that Lyre was the son of the Professors Cross—Naleni Cross who taught Cleric classes and Valyx Cross who taught Warrior combat training. Both were infamous for being strict, but Rai had never had a class with either.

“Not my whole life. But close enough,” Lyre said.

“Growing up at Eastridge with professors as parents must have been interesting,” Rai guessed. “How’s the assignment going?”

“Well enough,” Lyre said. “Eastridge seems to attract strange people.”

“Who are you following?”

“I haven’t decided yet.” Lyre shrugged. “It’s between a really strange Cleric major or one of those nobles in Emberlynn’s circle.”

“Ah, why are you having trouble?”

“I can’t decide whether I want to follow someone who’s interesting or someone who’s...” He fumbled.

“Easy on the eyes?” Rai hazarded a guess.

Lyre grinned. “Might as well have some fun with this while we’re at it.”

“A girl can be both interesting *and* beautiful,” Rai felt he had to point out.

“Very poetic, Ravin. But a girl’s always one more than the other.” Lyre smirked. “It’s not that Lady Dove’s not pretty or Lady Peony’s not interesting.”

“Right.”

Lyre shrugged. “Anyway, who are you tailing?”

“Wisteria Ling.”

“*The* Wisteria Ling?” Lyre sat up a little straighter. “Which one is she?”

A little thrown by Lyre’s reaction, Rai nodded hesitantly at the table where Wisteria was sitting alone. She had propped a textbook before her and was looking somewhat tired. Not so subtly, Lyre turned and stared.

“She’s prettier than I expected.” Lyre whistled and looked at Rai slyly. “So, pretty *and* interesting, eh?”

“She’s just my lab partner,” Rai said. “I didn’t realize she was famous.”

“Oh, hardly.” Lyre took a bite out of his bread roll. “She’s probably not famous to anyone but me. I’ve just heard a lot about her.”

“Why’s that?”

Lyre shrugged and took a long swig of water. Swallowing, he said, “She’s from Ling Monastery.”

“She is?”

“Of course.” Lyre frowned. “Wait, how long have you been following her? Anyway, you know the Ling Monastery’s reputation, so of course everyone’s curious about her.”

“Of course,” Rai echoed, pretending he understood.

Lyre raised an eyebrow. “You know how the Ling Monastery specializes in neutralizing enchanted items.”

“Uh... wouldn’t it be more impressive to enchant items instead?”

Lyre rolled his eyes. “It’s extremely interesting magical theory. Besides, Ravin, I’m surprised you don’t already know this. I thought it was common knowledge.”

“Right,” Rai said, frowning.

“By the way, you’ve stopped paying attention to your target,” Lyre pointed out, gesturing to the empty table Wisteria had been sitting at.

Rai swore softly under his breath. With a nod, he grabbed his things and ran after Wisteria.

~*~

Rai raced out of the dining commons, his mind running through all the different places she might go.

Wisteria didn't *do* much outside of class, other than her homework. So first he checked the Drop Tower Library. It was crowded; there was a group of second-year boys in her usual corner. He remembered, with a bit of sympathy, that she was always alone, and it seemed she actually went out of her way to avoid people. The Library right now was the last place she would be.

He tried her room, hanging from a tree outside and peering into the window, praying he wasn't about to get himself into more trouble than he was ready for. The Light spheres were flickering cheerfully inside, but the room was empty.

Where would she be?

He thought back. The one thing other than homework that she seemed to do with any regularity was walk through the gardens. While the Library occasionally filled up, the gardens were extensive enough to never feel crowded, undoubtedly the reason why Wisteria went there so often.

Rai failed to find Wisteria, but he did stumble across Annalise and her crowd of nobles. It crossed Rai's mind that he could simply cut his losses and change his target. He was getting nowhere with Wisteria, and surely one of the noble girls wouldn't be as guarded as his lab partner. Drawing closer, he overheard snatches of their conversation.

"The Winter Ball is only weeks away, and you mean to tell me, Nadine, that all the first-year girls aren't already gossiping about boys and gowns?" Annalise asked.

"More about boys than gowns," Nadine said with a smile. "And more about one boy than any other."

“I think we all know who you have your heart set on,” Annalise said with a conspiratorial smile. “And if we have anything to say about it, I’m sure you’ll be going with him.”

Rai couldn’t help wondering who Annalise was referring to, particularly when he heard Nadine’s response.

“Oh, I’d be so happy,” Nadine said. “But there are so many other girls who...”

“I think there’s only one girl you need to watch.”

Nadine frowned. “I suppose you’re right.”

“I wouldn’t be so friendly to her, if I were you,” Annalise added off-handedly. “At any rate, I doubt any friendship with the Princess would last long if you’re both in love with the same boy.”

Rai frowned. Now he *really* wanted to know which boy they were talking about.

“I never said I was in love!” Nadine said quickly, a blush already creeping across her face.

“Of course not, dear, you don’t have to,” Peony said, giggling. “It’s written all over your face, every time you’re around him.”

“Is it? Is it really?” Nadine asked, clearly worried.

“Don’t worry,” Annalise said. “Boys are always the last to know.”

The girls began to walk off, and Rai made a sharp turn and started to follow his new target. Rai may not have been the best or brightest Thief at Eastridge, but as Annalise and her girls left the garden, they never saw the dark blur in the shadows following them.

~*~

Rai followed Annalise and the nobility back to Drop Tower, where the girl disappeared into her room. Undaunted, Rai ran outside and scaled one of the many trees, climbing until he

was outside her window. He was starting to consider himself somewhat of an expert on entering the dorm through windows. Since he still hadn't found his room key, windows were his primary means of entering even his own room. He counted the windows twice to make sure he was outside the right one—it would be difficult enough explaining this if he was caught, even worse if he ended up outside the wrong person's room.

Luckily, the trees were planted close to the window—he could creep right next to it and glimpse in at the corner, where the pink drapes didn't quite block the view. He settled into a comfortable position on the tree branch, recalling the days during the first week of Thief class that had been spent planting saplings in various locations around campus. At the time, Nianzu had called it landscaping, but Rai was beginning to understand that nothing in the Thief Major was ever exactly what it seemed. He said a silent thanks to whatever first-year so many years ago had planted this tree and leaned closer to the window.

“Darling, you can't seriously be considering having your dress made of red,” Lady Annalise Emberlynn was saying. “It's scandalous.”

“I don't see why,” Lady Calla-Lily St. Claire protested. “I've always been fond of the color. And besides, the Princess wears a shade of burgundy, which is nearly the same as this.”

This went on for what seemed like hours to Rai. He almost nodded off in his tree when they finally reached a conclusion.

“Well,” Calla-Lily said, “I suppose lilac is also lovely.”

Nadine smiled. “That's true. And what are you wearing, Annalise?”

Annalise gave a shrug. “I'm having a new one made. I commissioned it in town before the start of the term. I knew that with classes, there'd hardly be the time needed to get a proper gown started. It's in the latest fashion. And the color is lovely.”

“I don’t think I’ll have... time... to get a new gown,” Nadine said, looking away. Rai didn’t know how well-off Nadine’s family was, but the blush on Nadine’s face suggested that it was more than just time keeping her from a new gown.

Rai shifted until he could see Annalise’s face. The older girl had a skeptical look on her graceful features. She was lounging on her bed, arranged as prettily as a portrait, and commanded the room with an imposing authority.

But when she spoke, her voice was friendly and gently teasing. “It’s never too early to begin preparing for a ball, is it? And at Eastridge, we’re given so few opportunities to enjoy social functions. You must borrow one of mine. You’ll have your choice of any gown. Lady Peony, let’s show Nadine what she has to choose from.”

Rai nearly lost his balance leaning over for a better view as Peony, amidst the giggling and squeaking of the girls, pulled out gown after gown from Annalise’s closet.

“You must have every gown in the world!” Nadine said breathlessly, watching as the pile grew.

“I’ve done my best to that end,” Annalise said, clearly amused by Nadine’s reaction. “Really, take your pick.”

Nadine disappeared behind the heap of dresses and emerged first holding up a pale white gown that gleamed with pearls at the neck and waist. That was rejected; apparently white was too demure for the Winter Ball. The next, a pale green gown with silver embroidery, was deemed good enough to try on, but that was also rejected on the grounds that the color did *nothing* for Nadine’s eyes and made her hair look too light. By the second hour of sitting in the tree, Rai was beginning to reconsider his decision to follow Annalise. He wasn’t any closer to finding something to steal, and time was running out.

“How about this one? It’s perfect!” Nadine said, for perhaps the tenth time.

Rai glanced over and saw her holding up a bright pink dress, the first pink dress that he had seen in the entire pile. It was delicate looking, with no lack of lace trimming, pearl accents, or flouncing gossamer fabric.

The girls exclaimed over it in delight, declaring that the shade was just perfect for Nadine’s complexion.

“Annalise, I thought you hated pink,” Peony remarked, holding the dress up to Nadine.

Annalise was silent. Rai watched as her expression changed from mild distaste to alarm. “Not that dress,” she said sharply.

The other girls backed away from it.

Nadine looked tearful. “But why…”

“It’s all wrong for the Winter Ball,” Annalise said smoothly, having recovered her composure. “Pink is a spring color.”

“Oh,” Nadine said, returning to the pile of gowns.

With a glance at each other, Calla-Lily and Peony seemed to question this, but ultimately they turned their attention back to helping Nadine. Annalise settled back onto her bed.

Rai couldn’t help smiling. He had seen through Annalise’s act. Maybe people didn’t wear pink, but that had nothing to do with why she wouldn’t let Nadine borrow the gown. He wasn’t sure why it was so important to her, but that was hardly the point. After only an hour of stalking, he had found something important to steal. At least this was one Thief mission he wasn’t going to fail.

~*~

Averi's muscles felt tight and tired. She had been crouched in a corner of the Sparring Grounds for the past hour, and only now that the Warriors had arrived for training did her muscles start complaining.

But Averi had learned to resist fidgeting the first time she had taken her place at the Royal Table for important functions. And if she had been able to remain completely motionless and expressionless for hours on end when she was five years old, she could certainly do it now.

So she remained crouched between the rocks of one of the sparring rings, completely silent, waiting. Averi knew this sparring ring. She knew all she had to do was wait.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before Torrent and Fell came to the center of the ring. Partly for revenge and partly out of a lack of any other ideas, Averi had chosen Torrent as her target for the first Thief assignment. After stalking him for the past few days, she had to conclude that he was little more than she had expected him to be. He beat those weaker than himself, laughed loudly over coarse jokes with Rakam, and spent every free moment he had training.

Trailing Torrent had been easy; he seemed to be utterly unconscious of anything that didn't appear to be a direct threat or potential target. To make matters easier, he spent most of his time in the common areas. The only difficult part of Averi's assignment was figuring out what to steal.

Unfortunately, the only item that Torrent seemed to have any sort of attachment to was his sword. He never let it out of his sight, he kept it near him even when he was training in hand-to-hand combat or lifting weights, and never let anyone else touch it. And then there was the fact that the sword was massive enough to make Averi doubt whether or not she could even lift it, let alone steal it without anyone noticing.

It was a daunting task, to say the least. But Averi knew that there was one time when the second-years were prohibited from having their weapons in hand: during *Sparring I*. Not only would Torrent be forced to put his sword aside, he would be distracted by whatever first-year was unlucky enough to be his victim. This far into the year, nearly all of the first-years had improved enough to keep the second-years on their toes, and the second-years had learned not to let their guard down during a match.

Luckily for Averi, Torrent always chose the same sparring ring. Averi glanced over at where the Warriors were standing, a couple dozen yards away. Halden was finishing with his introductory lecture, which was little more than throwing a few terms at the wide-eyed first-years, and then turning the second-years loose on them.

Subtly, the first-years edged away from Torrent's crew, trying to avoid ending up near any of them without actually drawing attention to the amount of distance they were attempting to put between themselves and the danger. Averi's eyes fell on Fell, as the boy stood his ground, refusing to give even an inch.

Averi bit her lip, as Torrent inevitably rounded on him, giving him a sharp push towards the sparring ring where she hid.

Ducking back down, Averi knew she should feel a grim sort of relief. From what Averi had seen, which was more than enough, she knew Torrent wouldn't get distracted while beating up on his favorite target. But that didn't change the sick feeling in her stomach as she watched Fell walk stoically to his fate.

But it was time for Averi to get to work. Concentrating, she wrote out the Hide Rune on her wrist. Immediately, she saw herself blur, blending into the surroundings. It wasn't as good as

an Invisibility Rune, but Averi didn't want to risk such a complicated rune on her first assignment, particularly when execution had never been her strong point.

Averi dared a quick look from behind the rocks and saw that they were already facing off. Fell had a grim look on his face that was only too familiar to Averi—it meant that Fell was resigned to the fact that he was about to get hurt. Badly.

And just then, Torrent lashed out with a sweeping kick that caught Fell in the chest.

Averi gasped, hating Torrent for hurting Fell. Lowering herself back into her hiding place, she shuddered, surer than ever that switching minors had been the right decision. Fell might be able to take it, but watching him endure it was... Averi shook her head, refocusing her concentration.

Averi breathed deeply and tried to stay calm. Now was the time to do it. She snuck another glance and saw that Torrent's sword was leaning against the rocks near them.

She heard a grunt of pain from Fell, and she knew that it was now or never. She darted out, her hand found the hilt, and she pulled at it, realizing that it was just as heavy as she had feared. Luckily, she had a spell ready. They hadn't learned many runes in the Thief major, but one of their assigned readings had listed some helpful runes that Averi had researched in the Mage library.

The Lift Rune was simple, and she had practiced it endlessly the night before. In the time it took to blink, she traced it quickly on the hilt of the sword. Activating it was somewhat more difficult, with the Hide Rune already taking a fair amount of effort to maintain, but Averi managed to cast the magic. Suddenly, the sword felt weightless in her hand. She pulled it up and rolled outside of the sparring ring.

She crouched there for a second, then sprinted off, making it out of the Sparring Grounds in a few short strides.

Once she was safely away, she hefted the sword, marveling at the strangeness of having such a heavy object almost float in her hand. But it wasn't until she was in the safety of the nearby stables that she took the time to release the runes she was holding and look over her stolen prize.

The sword was made of an expensive metal, perhaps more expensive than Averi would have expected a second-year student to have. The metal shone with a silvery gleam and felt smooth and polished against her hands. Obviously, it was maintained with great care. The handle was wrapped in leather, and at the hilt there was a single, tiny white string.

Averi looked at it closer and realized that it wasn't string. It was a delicate bit of ribbon. At the center, it held a small, cheaply made metal charm; the smallest that Averi had ever seen. It was rough and dull, too small to be worth even a copper. The shape of it was indistinct, but Averi imagined it could have been a heart.

Confused, Averi studied it for a few moments before prying back a few planks of the barn floor to reveal a hollowed out space she had created a few hours earlier. She pulled out a piece of cloth from the compartment and wrapped the sword. She didn't particularly care if she damaged something of Torrent's, but she was terrified of breaking any of the many rules and suffering through an entire year of *The Ethics of Thieving*.

Stowing it safely beneath the boards, Averi wrote a few protection runes over it in the dust. She knew they were too weak to keep out anyone who knew what they were doing, but it was the best she could do. And besides, she only had a few hours before Thief class met.

She dusted off her hands and stood, stretching to work out the cramps in her muscles. She wondered if she had time to check in with Rai. She hadn't seen him during their assignment, and she didn't even know who he was trailing. She wondered if it was anyone she knew...

~*~

Deciding to steal the dress had seemed like such a good idea when Rai had been sitting outside Annalise's window the night before. Now, with Cleric class getting out later than expected—Fell had brought them some complicated injuries—Rai had less than twenty minutes to sneak into Annalise's room, steal the dress, and decipher where the next Thief class would be.

As for deciphering the clue, Rai wasn't too concerned. He had gotten better at figuring out the codes, but that still didn't keep him from putting it off till the last minute. As for stealing the dress... that would be more complicated.

So, with a quick glance to make sure no one was around to see him, Rai scrambled up the tree outside Annalise's room and crept out onto the familiar branch directly below her window.

He only glanced in to check that it was empty. At this point, it hardly mattered. If Annalise had been throwing a party in her room, Rai would have smashed in the window, grabbed the dress, and run. He wasn't sure what qualified as stealth, but he wasn't about to show up to class empty-handed.

He squinted at the window, looking at it out of the corner of his eyes to see the protective runes written on the sill. Well, it was too late for that anyway. He hastily wrote out some basic runes that he hoped were the right ones to trick any protections and kicked open the window.

The hinges broke off, and Rai realized they weren't meant to open that way. He jumped through, eyes frantically searching for the gown. Well, of course, it would be in the wardrobe, he thought, his mind racing.

He threw open the doors of the wardrobe and frantically rifled through the dresses. Pink, pink, it had to be in here somewhere.

“What, exactly, do you think you’re doing?” a voice said slowly, crisply biting off each word.

Rai froze, swearing darkly. Turning slowly, he saw that Lady Annalise was standing in the doorway, one hand already half-raised to draw a rune if the situation called for it.

“Wraith Ravin?”

Rai couldn’t help it, a lopsided grin slid across his face. He bowed. “At your service, Lady Emberlynn.”

“Well, be that as it may, I would hardly expect to find you in my wardrobe,” she said, although her tone was more amused than angry.

“Just a silly little assignment for the Thief major,” he said in his most disarming tone. “You were right, I’m afraid, that a major like this is bound to get anyone in trouble, even if they have the best intentions.”

“So you were trying to steal from me?” Her tone seemed to darken. “And what were you after?”

“A gown, I’m afraid.”

“A gown!” Her eyes danced with amusement. “I hardly think it would suit you.”

Rai tilted his head down slightly and looked up at her with what he had been told was an irresistible and somewhat uncanny imitation of a puppy’s eyes. “It’s for my assignment, you see. We had to steal something, and I thought, I don’t know why, but that I ought to take something of yours.”

“And why is that?” she asked, but Rai could tell by the blush slowly creeping into her cheeks that she had already come to her own conclusions.

“It’ll seem foolish to you, I’m sure,” he drawled, “but I wanted something of yours. You must know that all the first-year boys talk about is you.”

Annalise smiled, but her eyes told Rai that she wasn’t entirely fooled. “Well, I would hate for you to fail your assignment. What sort of dress were you looking for? Something to match your eyes?”

“I was rather thinking something in pink,” he said.

Annalise’s eyes narrowed slightly at his words. “I don’t particularly like pink. I hardly ever wear it.”

“Even better,” he said. Glancing back at the wardrobe, he saw it at last, tucked into the back corner. He pulled it out. “You won’t miss it when it’s gone.”

Annalise looked as though she wanted to protest, but Rai quickly added, “Unless there’s some sort of reason why I can’t borrow it. I’d return it, of course, by tonight.”

“No, no reason,” Annalise said slowly. Her expression looked like she was weighing her options. “But, do be careful with it. It was a gift from my mother, and it has great value to me. I should take it much amiss if anything were to happen to it.”

Rai grinned. “I’ll see to it, Lady Emberlynn, that no harm befalls it.” Rai thought he was about to get away cleanly, and with a good five minutes to spare, when Peony, Calla-Lily, and Nadine walked through the door.

“What is *he* doing in here?” Calla-Lily asked, “And why is he holding that dress?”

“I’ve been robbed,” Annalise said seriously, but her smile betrayed her. “Someone, some Thief, has stolen my gown.”

Peony, who was the first to understand, giggled. “Why, what a scandal.”

“And he’s taken the pink gown, too,” Nadine observed. “He must have excellent taste.”

“But no sense of seasonal fashion,” Peony pointed out. “Unless he plans to wait till spring to wear it.”

“Oh, my, you shouldn’t have told him that,” Annalise said. “Now he’ll think he must strike again to procure something more fashionable.”

“Better lock your wardrobes, girls,” Calla-Lily St. Claire said slyly.

Rai took their teasing in stride, casually edging closer to the window as they spoke. After Calla-Lily’s comment, he smiled, bowing low to them with the dress draped over one arm.

“Ladies,” he said, and casually jumped out the window.

He could hear their gasps and was tempted to look back, but he knew it would be far more impressive if he was gone by the time they looked over the ledge. As he darted away, he could hear Nadine stammering, “But, where did he go?”

~*~

Thief class was held on the Sparring Grounds that evening, and as Rai neared, he could see first-years toting their targets’ various prized possessions. Amidst the circus of more than a few horses, some furniture, and trinkets of value, Rai found Averi.

“Good evening,” Rai said, ducking under the broadsword she was holding. “Glad to see you were successful.”

“Me too, but it wasn’t so bad. How about you?” Averi asked.

“Went better than I expected.” Rai brandished the dress with a flourish. “What do you think?”

“In my opinion,” Averi said, giving him the once-over, “that color does nothing for your complexion.”

“Hah, hah,” Rai mock-laughed, as he darted to save the pink dress from slipping off its hanger again. It was ridiculously voluminous and hard to manage, and he had to keep readjusting it. He didn’t think sweet-talking would save him from Lady Annalise if he dropped one of her favorite gowns into the mud of the Sparring Grounds.

“Hello, first-years,” Professor Nianzu boomed, and several students jumped as she appeared a moment later with a slew of upperclassmen. “Congratulations on the completion of your first real assignment. I hope you all have something to show for your efforts...”

There was a murmur of excitement, quickly quieted by Nianzu continuing, “...because you have until the next class period to return the stolen article to the original owner without detection.”

There was a collective groan. Nianzu smiled without sympathy and clapped her hands to signal the upperclassman forward. “That is your assignment. The rest of class will be devoted to evaluation of the trial thus far. This last week, I’ve had your mentors tail you to ensure you’ve been operating according to the Thief’s Handbook. Grades are on a twenty-point scale, and two mentors will grade each of you according to criteria they’ve invented.”

Rai hoped he heard the last part incorrectly.

Nianzu call the first student forward—a nervous-looking ‘Aloric, Vane’ from Rai’s healing class stepped up to the dais Nianzu was standing on. Two upperclassmen materialized beside him, and poor Vane jumped. One of the upperclassmen steadied him.

“Thief Aloric, your token, please?”

The first-year carefully pulled a small locket wrapped in gift-paper from his pocket.

Nianzu nodded approvingly and turned to Vane's mentors. "Rhyll? Pleiades? Your thoughts?"

"Rhyll reporting on Thief Aloric," said the male of the two Thieves. "Five marks each for finding a target, following her without detection, and stealing the artifact without a hitch."

"But," Rhyll's female partner Pleiades said, before Vane could look too pleased, "zero points for being suave. Really, attaching branches to your hat for camouflage? Not the latest style in Thief trends." She gave him a hearty slap on the back for good measure to signal his exit from the stage. "Fifteen."

Vane stumbled down into the crowd, disbelief clearly written across his face.

Nianzu called the next name on the list. Apparently, Rai hadn't heard wrong when Nianzu had said it was up to the mentors to choose the grading criteria. Most of the students were graded normally on following their target, finding an object, and stealing it. A few unlucky ones, however, were graded on Inappropriate Apparel for Nighttime Snooping (-3 points), Tree-Climbing Technique (-6 points), and Ducking with Dignity (-4 points), among others.

Good grades were few and far between. Despite his perpetual concern for his grade, Lyre Cross managed to get high marks for his theft of an unassuming white book, earning the bulk of his points for something called Double-Stalking a Target (+8 points), which seemed to mean that he had chosen a target who already had a Thief stalking him. Sariil Darek, on the other hand, got questionable marks for a Superfluous Overuse of Magic (-4 points) and a flat out deduction for Lack of Style (-5 points).

Rai prayed his mentors had a good sense of humor.

"Ravin, Rai."

Rai stepped forward and presented the dress.

“Interesting choice,” Nianzu murmured. She gestured to Rai’s mentors. “Silhouette? Jacey?”

Rai recognized Jacey as the blonde Thief who had laughed at him the first time he had come to class barefoot.

“After deliberation between two female targets, Thief Ravin successfully identified an article close to one of his female targets within the bounds of limitations,” Silhouette started in monotone, gesturing to the dress. “However, in his attempts to actually steal said article, the target discovered Thief Ravin’s presence and objected.”

“I notice that, despite the target’s discovery, the stolen article is here.” Nianzu lifted an eyebrow at Rai Ravin. “How, pray tell, did you still manage to steal the item after being detected?”

“Professor, I simply talked the female target out of her dress,” Rai remarked with a cheeky grin, and a wave of mostly male laughter erupted. Rai was fairly sure he heard Jacey snicker. Silhouette just stared at him icily.

Rai hoped that beneath Professor Nianzu’s mask was an amused grin. Turning to Jacey and Silhouette, she asked, “Final Mark?”

“Negative five points for getting caught,” Silhouette said, a little too sharply. “Ten points for choosing a difficult target—a second-year Mage. Three points for gathering information on the subject’s token.”

Rai winced and gave Jacey a pleading look.

“But,” Jacey continued, with a smile at her charge, “Full credit for Roguish Charm, which counts for a lot more than you might expect.”

Rai’s face brightened.

“Fifteen,” Jacey announced, as a final verdict, and Rai leaped down the stairs, the joy of his first relative victory in Thief class boosting his mood.

Averi’s name was called, and Rai smiled at her as she walked up to the platform.

Two identical, black-clad figures of the same height, build, and, oddly, face came to stand on either side of Averi once she had made it to the stairs. They looked remarkably like male versions of Rai’s mentor Silhouette. Rai vaguely remembered hearing somewhere that the three were triplets in the Thief major.

“Shade? Shadow?” Nianzu prodded, as Averi held the sword out with one hand.

Both nodded in tandem, and any chance of distinguishing them from each other by name was lost to Rai. He wondered if Averi noticed the difference.

“Thief Rysten successfully stalked her target,” one of the triplets—who Rai randomly guessed was Shade—said.

The other one interrupted, “She chose a difficult assignment, which counts for something. A notorious, second-year who some of you may know as Tor—oh, we’re not supposed to mention names.”

Not that it mattered, since many Thieves gave an appreciative chuckle, having recognized the target by the massive sword alone.

“Honestly, we were glad to see her pull it off. He needed to be taken down a peg or two,” the first one said. “So... full credit for Target Choice.”

“And, taking the sword!” Shadow glowed, “Risky, but that’s not bad for a Thief. Full credit for Taking on a Daunting Task.”

“It’s not easy task to steal a sword that’s nearly as big as yourself,” Shade said. “The magic was a nice touch. Points for Aptly Appropriate Use of Magic...”

Nianzu cleared her throat, and catching his professor's glare, Shadow said, "And, so as far as final marks, it looks like Thief Rysten has earned herself a perfect score..."

Averi looked relieved. Rai caught her eye and winked at her. She smiled back at him as Shade put a friendly hand on her shoulder.

"Just don't botch the return," he said with a smile.

Chapter 5 – Nobility

If Averi had known that she would be required to return the item she stole, she probably would have gone after an easier item than a massive broadsword that she could barely lift. Thief class had ended abruptly and everyone had dispersed into the twilight to return their items. A few lucky students were only coaxing stolen horses back to the stables, which were hardly guarded to begin with. Others had slipped away into the shadows to track down their targets so they could replace the items from where they had taken them. Averi sighed, thinking longingly of locket, rings, and other trinkets that could be easily slipped back into a pocket or satchel before the victim even realized the object was missing.

But such thoughts did Averi little good as she lugged the five-foot sword towards Drop Tower, muttering curses under her breath as her fingers fumbled to retrace the Lift Rune. She had enacted the Lift Rune when she had taken the sword to class, but only now that she was actually walking with it, attempting to stealthily slide through the night, did the rune wear off and leave her with the impossibly heavy piece of metal that she strained to pull even a few feet at a time.

Twice, as she pulled at it, she mixed up the Lift Rune with the Light Rune, causing a burst of white light to emanate around her, which she could hardly imagine would win her any points for Stealth. Once, she nearly etched the Shatter Rune, but luckily, she recognized her mistake before she executed the spell.

Finally, she stopped dead in the center of the path, and in the light of the half-full moon, etched out the Lift Rune and pushed it impatiently towards the sword. Immediately, the weight that had been pulling at her disappeared so drastically that she nearly fell over.

Quickly recovering her balance, Averi crept into the safe covering of the shadows. She leaned against the base of a tree to catch her breath. So, where would Torrent be? Her first guess was the Warrior wing of Drop Tower, so she started her search there. She could have entered through the main door, but she didn't want to risk being seen by anyone while her Thief mentors were still probably watching her.

Now that she was near the building, Averi took the time to trace out the long and complicated Invisibility Rune. She watched as the sword flickered in her hand and disappeared. *So far so good*, she thought. Next she set to work tracing the same rune on the back of her hand. It was more complicated for people than for objects, and it only lasted as long as she kept her concentration on the spell, but she couldn't think of any other way to avoid being seen. The Hide Rune wouldn't be good enough, not for what she had to do. Besides, unlike when she had stolen the sword, she had plenty of time to get it right.

She wrote the Invisibility Rune without making any mistakes. *No problems, as long as there's no pressure*, she thought ruefully, as she activated the rune. She took a deep breath, letting her concentration settle evenly over the runes she was holding in place. The Invisibility Rune was no small magic, and she knew she could hold it in place for only a matter of minutes. It would have to be enough.

Through an open window, she slid into the Warrior wing of Drop Tower. She slunk down the hallway towards the training room at the end of the hall. Part of the Thief major's required reading was the blueprints to Drop Tower, so Averi knew exactly where to go. She found the room easily and glanced in through the open door.

Fell was in there, determinedly pounding a punching bag in the farthest corner of the room. In the middle of the room, there was a scattered assortment of second-years that Averi had seen during her time as a Warrior minor. At the center of the group was Torrent.

“I said, I want to know who took my sword!” he shouted, taking a swing at the second-year boy that had just spoken to him. The second-year, a muscular boy with red hair, fell backwards. He slowly got to his feet, a dark look on his face, but he didn’t seem reckless enough to fight back.

Unsatisfied, Torrent turned away from him and slowly scanned the room.

The few first-years who were still there had enough sense to leave. All of them, of course, except Fell. Averi wanted to physically reach out and drag Fell away. Or at least warn him.

She was about to try to get his attention, but she saw his eyes flicker, just for a second, over to Torrent, then back to his punching bag.

He knows, she thought. He knows and he’s still not going to leave.

“You! Get over here!” Torrent pointed to Fell.

Fell didn’t look over. He just kept jabbing the punching bag, his face grimly set.

Averi could feel her heart beating quickly in her chest. This wasn’t exactly how she had planned to return the sword—at the very least, she could have left it in Torrent’s room, and hoped that it was close enough to count as returned—but she wasn’t about to let Fell get hurt on her account.

And at that moment, Rakam nearly tripped over Averi on his way into the training room.

The concentration that Averi had kept on holding the Invisibility Rune in place was shattered. She flickered into view, though the sword remained hidden.

The startled expression on Rakam's face was nearly worth the debacle that Averi's Thief assignment had become.

He instinctively grabbed her, wrapping one of his hands around her wrist and pulling her into the training room, although the look on his face was still one of complete bewilderment.

"Look what I found," Rakam said, pushing her in front of Torrent.

"What's she doing here?" Torrent snapped, turning murderous eyes on her.

"I... I have something for you," Averi stammered.

There was an awkward pause. Averi knew it would be nearly impossible to try explaining that she indeed had his sword, that it happened to be invisible, and it was also entirely weightless. Aside from sounding insane, Averi doubted that directly handing over the stolen item would actually count as anything other than a complete failure for the assignment. Although how much she could salvage from *this* situation was debatable.

"Well?" Torrent asked, his dark eyes searching her.

Words normally came so easily to Averi, but she found herself speechless. There was something deeper in Torrent's eyes than just blind anger at losing something that was his. There was something hurt in his expression. Averi began to wonder if she had misjudged what the sword meant to him, though she couldn't begin to understand what it was that made him feel so deeply.

"What do you have?" Torrent said again, and though his tone was harsh, Averi didn't feel afraid.

"Leave her alone," Fell said quietly. He had stopped pounding the punching bag. His hair hung down in his eyes as he squinted at Torrent.

The softness in Torrent's eyes disappeared. "What, exactly, do you think you're going to do, first-year?"

When Fell spoke, there was none of the usual unassuming and self-effacing backwardness. Every word rang out clear and solid in the room. "I'm not going to let you hurt her."

Averi couldn't believe what Fell was doing. Why would Fell willingly take on Torrent in a fight?

"I can only imagine," Torrent said, cracking his knuckles, "that I'll feel better after this."

Fell stepped up to Torrent, coming precariously close to him without even flinching.

"You're not scared," Torrent observed, in a tone that sounded almost amused.

"You've hit me before," Fell said.

Torrent had to smile at that.

"Wait," Averi said, so quietly it was nearly a whisper. Then, more loudly, "Wait! I have it. I have your sword." The Lift spell was beginning to wear off, and Averi's hands were pulled down as she rested the tip of the sword against the ground.

Everyone turned to her. So much for subtlety. So much for not failing. She let go of the Invisibility Rune. A bright metallic gleam shimmered through the air as the sword appeared.

Torrent immediately grabbed it from her in one hand, and his other hand went up and gripped Averi's arm, just as he had on the first day of classes. "You took my sword," he stated.

"I'm sorry," she gasped as he shook her.

"What makes you think you can—"

"Take your hands off her!" Fell cried, shoving himself between Averi and Torrent. Averi fell against the wall, and Torrent was pushed towards the center of the room.

To Averi's surprise, Torrent allowed himself to be shoved back. He looked down at his sword, and Averi saw his eyes searching the hilt.

"Don't pull a stunt like this again, *Princess*," Torrent said coldly. "There's a reason why the Thieves go after Clerics and Mages for their assignments." With a warning glare at Fell, Torrent raised his sword with both hands.

Faster than Averi would have expected from him, and too fast for Fell to react at all, Torrent brought his sword down hard, smashing through the wall right next to Averi. With a terrible crash, the wooden wall behind her came apart, a gaping hole smashed through it.

Averi winced, but her eyes were locked with Torrent's, and neither looked away. She hardly dared to breathe as Torrent stood only inches away from her, his hands still on the sword's hilt, the sword still embedded in the wall. Averi realized that she wasn't afraid.

Effortlessly, Torrent wrenched the sword out of the wall and rested the dull side against his shoulder. For the time being, Averi surmised, the destruction of the wall seemed to satisfy him. With one last look at Averi, he left.

Once he was gone, Averi noticed she was shaking. She looked up as Fell put his hand on her shoulder.

"It's okay," Fell said. "He's gone."

Averi gave Fell a small smile. "Thank you. For what you did. And for what you would have done."

Fell shook his head and looked away. "What was it that I did that you'd be grateful for? Being ready to get hit by Torrent?"

He laughed in a way that made Averi laugh too.

"Princess, that's what I do every day."

~*~

Wisteria Ling had lost her *Book of Runes*.

It wasn't in any of her tunic pockets or in her satchel. She had searched her bookshelf, under her bed, and in her desk drawers. She didn't think Averi or Rai would have borrowed it without telling her, and after an hour of tearing apart her room, she started worrying that she had dropped it somewhere.

When a visit to the gardens and the dining room confirmed that it wasn't in either of those places, she wandered into the Library and searched the tables and desks near the doorway. Coming to the corner table she usually occupied, she scanned the tabletops, then after still not seeing her book, knelt and stuck her head under the chairs and desks to search underneath.

“Wisteria Ling?”

Surprised, she hit her head on the hard wood, cursed, and glanced out from under the table. A boy stood behind her, looking concerned. He was pale despite the warmth of the Light Orbs in the room, and he was much taller than any boy she had ever seen. He had eyes the color of young, mountain violets—a light yet vivid purple—and white-blond hair that curled around his ears.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Fine, fine.” She rubbed her head and glared out of habit. “Who are you?”

“Lyre,” the boy said, extending his hand both as a greeting and an offer. She let him pull her to her feet.

“Did you want something?” Wisteria asked.

Lyre swallowed. “I didn't mean to surprise you,” he said quickly, “but I think you might be looking for this.”

He held a book out to her, shifting under her scrutiny. She frowned and took it from him. She checked for the torn page in the center of the book and for the name she'd written inside the front flap. When she looked back at him again, her face was awash with relief.

"I'd been looking for it everywhere," Wisteria said once she had verified it was hers.

"I thought you might be," Lyre said, shrugging. "The book looked too well-loved to be a throwaway."

"I take it everywhere with me," Wisteria explained. She opened the book again, and her anxiety faded as she thumbed through it. "Where did you find it?"

Lyre rubbed the back of his neck. "In the gardens."

"I do spend a lot of time there," Wisteria admitted. She gave him a tentative smile. "I appreciate you returning it. Thank you."

"It was no trouble," Lyre said. "You were easy to find."

"Oh?"

"Yes, you're quite well-known."

Curious, Wisteria regarded him. "For what?"

"Beating up all the boys in Combat Casting. Being the Princess' roommate...and Rai Ravin's lab partner," Lyre said and chuckled when she made a face.

"Not exactly what I want to be remembered for," Wisteria said dryly.

Lyre tilted his head. "You're funny. I didn't expect that."

"What were you expecting?" Wisteria asked with a raised eyebrow.

Lyre shrugged. "You always seem so serious."

"You seem to know a lot about me for someone I've just met," Wisteria said.

"I'm friends with Rai," Lyre said.

“Well, thank you for returning my book.”

Lyre gave her a smile. “See you around.”

~*~

Returning Annalise’s dress was easy. The Lady in question was in the Library at this hour, and she had taken her crowd of noble ladies with her. To make matters easier, the window he had escaped from was still open—or rather, still broken from his earlier entrance. All Rai had to do was slip in, hang the dress in the wardrobe, and slip out the door.

Returning to his room, he couldn’t help but feel a surge of pride at finally, *finally* having succeeded. He had been feeling down about his lack of success in anything dealing with the Thief major, but if he kept doing well with assignments like this, then he could still hold his head up.

That’s why, the note on his desk in telling Thief Code was a rather hard blow. After he deciphered it, the note read:

We regret to inform you that the Stolen Item (Formal Day Gown) taken from the target was found to be beyond the allowable scope of value for a Stolen Item for this assignment. The Stolen Item (Formal Day Gown) has been appraised at a value of over ten (10) Gold. Consequently, you will be required to take The Ethics of Thieving next quarter in order to continue your studies at Eastridge Academy: School for Adventurers.

Rai crumpled the letter, disappointed. Well, that victory was short-lived. He didn’t feel like staying in his room, so he wandered around and ended up in the deserted area of the garden.

“I thought I’d be better at it,” he mused to himself as he settled onto a bench. Didn’t he have enough practice gleaning house gossip by lurking in the shadows and listening to conversations to gauge the length and breadth of people and their values? Apparently, years of unraveling family secrets through such stealth had done little to help him discern what was important and what was not.

He sighed, lying on the bench lazily. There weren’t any students out here tonight—that suited him. For the first time in awhile, he wasn’t up to dealing with other people.

Thieves didn’t have any mythical figures that they blamed for their failures. Clerics often attributed their successes or misfortunes on the legendary Cleric Allora. So it was Allora that Rai chose to fault for this turn of ill-luck, both with his Thief assignment and with the fact that his isolation in the garden was short-lived.

“You’re on my bench, Ravin.”

There weren’t many people that greeted him by his last name alone. There were fewer that managed to say it with such disdain.

“Good evening, Wisteria,” he said without looking. His lab partner moved into his range of vision, one hand on her waist. She held a light sphere in the other hand, and the *Book of Runes* was tucked under her arm. He sat up and swung his legs under the bench.

“I regret ever telling you about this place,” Wisteria said, not unkindly, but she didn’t sit down. “Now, I expect I have to share it with you.”

“Don’t strain yourself being polite. I was just borrowing it,” Rai said. Wisteria raised an eyebrow. Rai sighed heavily. “But I can leave it to you.”

It must have been the way he said it because something made Wisteria simply sit and say, “No, it’s fine,” without further fuss. She propped her book open. The light sphere flickered cheerfully in the dark.

“You must be in a good mood today,” he observed. “It’s not every day that you’d let me share your bench.”

“I lost my *Book of Runes*. But today, someone found it for me and returned it.”

Book of Runes? Rai narrowed his eyes, suddenly realizing why Lyre’s stolen token for the Thief assignment had seemed so familiar. “Someone returned it? It wasn’t Lyre Cross, was it?”

“As a matter of fact, it was. He mentioned that the two of you were friends.”

That was an exaggeration. Rai debated telling Wisteria the truth—that Lyre hadn’t *found* her book so much as *stolen* it and then returned it—but he was willing to bet that there was some kind of Thief penalty for revealing another Thief’s work. Instead, he only nodded.

“So, it’s been awhile since I’ve seen you,” Rai said, when he noticed she hadn’t turned a page in the last few minutes.

“Yesterday, in class?”

This earned her an irritated look from Rai. “I meant, outside of class.”

“Couldn’t you tell? I’ve been avoiding you,” Wisteria said. She paused a moment while he tried to puzzle out what she meant, then said, “Don’t want to get my formal gowns *stolen* and all.”

“How’d you hear about that?”

“You have all the girls *atwitter*,” Wisteria replied, tilting her head forward with an amused half-smile. “Apparently, jumping out windows is dashing rather than potentially fatal. Gossip like that travels quickly.”

“It was for an assignment I was working on.”

“What kind of assignment?” Wisteria turned a page in her book.

“A Thief assignment,” Rai said darkly. He gripped the crumpled letter in his pocket, and reveled in the crinkling sound it made. “One that didn’t end well.”

“Sorry to hear that.” Wisteria closed her book. “It *sounded* like you had done well for yourself.”

“High marks for Roguish Charm.”

“Of course,” Wisteria snorted.

“But, the dress was too expensive,” Rai sighed. “A penalty for not noticing that detail.”

“Aren’t Thieves supposed to be interested in expensive things?”

“Thieves are supposed to be interested in the right kind of expensive thing,” Rai corrected. “Guess I’m not cut out to be a Thief.”

“You’re not,” Wisteria agreed.

“Thanks,” he said.

“You said it yourself,” she added.

“I was hoping to garner some sympathy.”

“From me?” Wisteria asked with a flippant grin.

Rai couldn’t help chuckling.

“But, really, you don’t enjoy Thieving; I don’t know why you pursue it in the first place.”

“Excuse me?”

“You can never find your classes or your classmates; you’re always complaining of low marks,” Wisteria pointed out. “You were obviously interested enough in Cleric-work to take four years of it at some fancy preparatory school. Why become a Thief instead?”

Her comment annoyed him, and he looked away. “I’m surprised you remember all of that.”

“It’s hard to block it *all* out when you go on and on about your life,” Wisteria told him. “And you didn’t answer my question.”

“Why I’m training to be a Thief?” Rai sighed. “I have my reasons.”

“I hope you do,” Wisteria said seriously. There was an awkward pause before Wisteria continued, “I wouldn’t worry about the penalty though. If you really want to become a Thief...”

“I do.”

“...you probably just need a little more practice. Four years of Thieving, and you’ll be arguing with your Thief partner about proper technique.” She gave a small, rare smile.

Rai smiled back. “Thieves work alone.”

“I’m sure you’ll find someone to argue with then,” Wisteria replied. They both turned to look at the clock tower as the curfew bells tolled. Wisteria tucked her book under her arm and stood. Rai walked with her back to Drop Tower.

At the entrance, they parted ways.

“Good night, Ravin,” Wisteria said.

Rai smiled.

“Good night, Raven.”

~*~

Averi returned to her room, wishing more than anything that she could remain hidden there for the rest of the week. She was a few scant minutes past the second curfew bell ringing—not late enough to get in trouble, but late enough that her roommate was already there.

“That was a disaster,” she remarked offhandedly to Wisteria, who was on her side of the room, calmly reading the same book Averi always saw her holding.

“Oh?” Wisteria asked half-heartedly, not looking up.

Averi shot her roommate a cross look. “Never mind. I suppose you wouldn’t understand.”

“Probably,” Wisteria agreed, almost sounding cheerful.

Averi sighed. She was dreading the next Thief class, dreading seeing Shadow and Shade, and most of all dreading the failing grade that she was sure she would get. But she was resigned to all of these inevitable consequences for her abysmal work.

Still, she was not at all prepared to find a letter on her bed, addressed to her in the coded script that the Thief professors used for low-priority communications.

Without hesitating, Averi ripped open the letter and read it quickly, pausing only to check her deciphering. When she had finished, she set the letter down and rubbed her forehead. The letter read:

We regret to inform you that the Stolen Item (Sword) taken from the target was found to be beyond the allowable scope of value for a Stolen Item for this assignment. The Stolen Item (Sword) has been appraised at a Level Ten Sentimental Value. Consequently, you will be required to take The Ethics of Thieving next quarter in order to continue your studies at Eastridge Academy: School for Adventurers.

There was no signature or greeting—the Thief Major didn't believe in writing down information that could be traced back to anyone—but Averi knew that it could be no mistake. After how furiously Torrent had reacted, even Averi had to admit that the sword must have been extremely important for reasons that had nothing to do with its Market Price.

Averi reclined on her bed looking up at the ceiling. She knew she should feel the unfairness of the situation, that she should protest that she had done everything she could to ascertain the Sentimental Value of the sword before she took it. However, there was some part of her that argued, even if she had known, wouldn't she still have taken it? And because of that, Averi thought it better to not protest the extra coursework.

~*~

The hour between dinner and curfew was one of the few times that the boys and girls were allowed to mingle unsupervised. At *The University for Arcane Magics*, such a time was utterly unheard of, so of course at Eastridge, it was Averi's favorite time of day. On most evenings, she and about half the first and second-year students could be found in the Library of Drop Tower, visiting friends and sharing rumors.

Tonight, however, Averi would have guessed that every last first- and second- year was crammed into the Library of Drop Tower. The usual hushed murmurs of gossip were replaced by a loud and steady hum that reverberated through the room.

She could hear the snatches of whispers floating around the room and see the way people eyed her and Torrent. Was it really true, everyone wanted to know, that last night, Torrent had thrashed half the second-year class in a fit of rage? And some first-year had threatened Torrent and walked away without a scratch? And, what was the most unbelievable, that the Princess had stolen Torrent's sword?

It was unbelievable, they were all saying. Well, nearly. Averi hid a smile.

Torrent and the toughest of the second-year Warriors had claimed the back corner of the room, some casually defacing books and others chipping away at the wooden furniture with spare knives and daggers. Torrent and Rakam lounged in chairs near the wall, their feet and weapons propped up on the table. More than one person within Averi's earshot claimed to see Torrent watching the Princess out of the corner of his eye.

Which, however, wasn't so unusual when one took into account that nearly every boy in the room spent half the night watching the Princess and Annalise. Sitting at the center of the room and surrounded by nobility, Averi and Annalise seemed to preside over a younger version of the Royal Court. Averi was only half listening to the nobility tonight. It was difficult to let them hold her attention, particularly when there was so much gossip filling the air.

But Averi couldn't ignore Phaeton when he leaned flirtatiously close to her to whisper, "I wouldn't ever ask you if it did happen or didn't, but if you did, it was an impressive thing to do."

Averi laughed politely and gave Phaeton a small shove back to a respectful distance. "What a very pointed remark," she observed.

"How did you do it?" Trevon Harting asked, his voice conspiratorially low. "I'd do anything to know, Princess."

Averi waved her hand dismissively. "A good Thief never reveals her secrets."

"So you admit it?" he demanded, grinning in triumph.

"I made an observation," Averi said, shaking her head at him. "I'll admit nothing."

"You're too beautiful to be a Thief," Phaeton informed her, gazing into her eyes. "And even if you confessed, no one would dare lay a hand on you."

“Your eyes are too innocent,” Trevon pointed out, elbowing Phaeton out of the way. “No one would believe it.”

Averi could only smile politely at the compliments and hope that the topic would turn to something more conversational than her eyes. In Averi’s silence, Phaeton stomped on Trevon’s foot, and the two excused themselves to have a word away from the ladies.

After the two boys left, Annalise delicately cleared her throat to get Averi’s attention. “I would never question your judgment, Princess,” Annalise said in a lofty tone. “However, I would consider myself remiss if I didn’t give you the benefit of my experience.”

“Oh, Lady Annalise, please,” Averi said archly, “benefit me.”

Annalise dropped her voice. “You must know that while none of the nobility here would *dare* to speak behind your back, the lower classes have no such tact, and at this school, they are the majority.”

“Your meaning, Lady Annalise?”

Annalise smiled thinly. “People gossip, Princess. And tonight, they gossip about you. There are only a handful of reasons why a girl would steal a boy’s sword, and why he would let her get away with it. And even worse, why some low-born commoner would come to her defense.”

“And am I to concern myself over every rumor?” Averi asked, looking around the circle. Lady Calla-Lily was oddly quiet, and Lady Nadine didn’t meet her eyes.

“You should concern yourself with making sure that the rumors are not true,” Annalise said, gesturing over at Torrent.

Averi looked where she pointed and caught the Warrior staring at the two of them. Averi blushed, at a loss for words. Fortunately, the clock tower tolled the beginning of curfew, and the students hastened to get to their rooms.

As they left, Calla-Lily St. Claire pulled Averi back.

“Jealousy is never pretty, is it?” she asked Averi in a whisper so quiet that Averi hardly heard her. “You know why our dear Lady Annalise is concerned for you, don’t you?”

Averi shook her head, and Calla-Lily smiled.

“It’s a scandalous thing for a noble lady to be implicated in a rumor with a commoner,” Calla-Lily said. “And last year, there was quite a similar scandal about the dear Warrior Torrent.”

“Oh?” Averi asked, trying to sound casual. “And the girl?”

“Couldn’t you guess?” Calla-Lily asked, batting her eyes innocently. “The girl was Annalise.”

~*~

For about a day after the incident in the training room, Fell was a hero. It took a few hours for the rumors to circulate, and for Javen, Cai, and all of the other first-year Warrior majors to believe what had happened. Javen was the first to come around.

“So you really did it, didn’t you?” Javen had asked Fell the night after the incident with Torrent and Averi. “You took on Torrent. And walked away clean.”

Fell shook his head. “It wasn’t exactly like that.”

Javen grinned. “So tell me.”

“He was going to hurt the Princess. I just pushed him away from her. Anyone else would have done the same thing,” Fell said with a shrug. “And actually, I didn’t really *do* anything.”

Javen shook his head. “You stood up to Torrent. *Torrent*, Fell. And you’re still alive. That’s something right there. None of the first-years can say they’ve done as much.”

After that conversation, Javen must have spread the word to the others. Cai slapped Fell on the back during their shift working at the stables. Vinden congratulated him at dinner. A small group of first-years even applauded when Fell entered the Warrior wing of Drop Tower that night.

Fell had nearly an entire day to enjoy the praises of the first-year Warriors. Fell knew he wouldn’t have longer than that. But all in all, for once, it had been a nice weekend.

As he woke up the following morning, Fell knew that his time was up. He entered the Sparring Grounds that day, grimly resigned to his fate.

When they paired up for sparring, Torrent nearly punched another second-year for almost claiming Fell.

Fell began to worry.

Class began. Torrent didn’t say anything. He started cracking his knuckles.

“You can’t kill me,” Fell pointed out, backing up a step. “They don’t let you do that.”

“Accidents happen,” Torrent told him.

Fell gulped. He noticed that Torrent had picked one of the rocky sparring rings. Fell tried to keep his eyes on Torrent, and nearly lost his balance on the uneven surface.

Torrent laughed, walking up to Fell without so much as a glance at the rocks they were standing on. Torrent slapped his hand into his fist, then pulled back and threw a punch at Fell. But the blow didn’t land.

Fell had watched Torrent’s body. Fell had predicted his move. And Fell had dodged.

Torrent, for the first time in a long time, had missed. More than a few Warriors noticed. Sparring around them stopped. Everyone watched.

For the slightest moment, Fell thought that Torrent looked surprised. Then the moment was over, and Torrent swung again, faster this time. Fell tried to move, but Torrent's fist connected with his chest.

The pain left Fell dazed and before he could recover, Torrent was pummeling his stomach and sides with sharp jabs. Fell fell back, landing hard on the rocks. He tried to move and groaned. At least a couple of his ribs were broken.

Torrent cracked his knuckles, waiting for Fell to get up.

Torrent fights with his hands, Fell thought as he rolled to his feet.

Fell was ready this time. Torrent feinted to the left. Fell dodged right, realizing too late that he had been tricked. Torrent caught Fell's head with a powerful right hook.

Splashes of bright light exploded in Fell's vision. He backed away, trying to buy himself a few seconds while he waited for his head to clear.

Torrent walked calmly towards Fell, with a slowness that in the past had lulled Fell into believing the older boy wasn't fast.

Fell realized grimly that just reacting wasn't enough. Torrent was too quick. Thinking back to the first swing that he had dodged, Fell realized with a sickening feeling that Torrent had been holding back.

But Torrent wasn't holding back now. Fell would never be able to dodge. The realization set in, and Fell stopped backing away.

Torrent stepped up to Fell, trying to read him. "Try it," Torrent said. "Try to hit me."

Fell shook his head. He knew better now.

Torrent shrugged and slammed Fell with a solid punch to his already-broken ribs.

But Fell was ready. And while it hurt, it seemed to hurt from very far away, from a place that Fell could see, but couldn't feel or know. All Fell knew was his hands latching onto Torrent's arm and his foot sweeping out at Torrent's legs, making the older boy stumble. And then, letting go with his right hand, Fell crashed his elbow into Torrent's face.

The Warriors watching erupted into shouts and jeers. It was not the first time a first-year had landed a hit on a second-year, but it was the first time anyone had seen Torrent get hit.

Fell hadn't expected the pain to faze Torrent, but he had anticipated *some* sort of reaction. The second-year didn't even twitch. Instead, he rammed his elbow into Fell's chest. While Fell was gasping, Torrent grabbed Fell's hand and twisted it behind him, wrenching Fell's arm behind his back. Fell struggled, but couldn't do anything as Torrent held his arm and kicked him between the shoulder blades. Without a pause, Torrent kicked the back of Fell's knee, forcing him to the ground.

His hand still caught at an excruciating angle, Fell gave a cry of pain that was cut short as Torrent elbowed him sharply in the back of his head, finally releasing Fell's arm so the boy could fall face first to the ground. Fell felt his nose break against the rocky surface. He could taste blood in his mouth. He scrambled to get up, but the pain was overwhelming, and he couldn't see anything.

Torrent stood over Fell for a moment, looking around at the other Warriors, then down at the boy on the ground in front of him. Dimly, Fell could hear first-years calling for Halden to stop the fight.

But Torrent had already stopped. The older boy sat down next to Fell, breathing hard. Alarmed, Fell inhaled sharply, swallowing blood and coughing.

“Breathe slowly, you idiot,” Torrent said, shaking his head. “You’ll be fine, as long as you don’t do anything stupid.”

Fell spit out the blood and took shallow breaths through his mouth. Still face-down against the rocky ground, he could only see Torrent out of one eye, but he was almost sure the older boy had a look of approval.

Once a few of the first-year Clerics had carried Fell to the Infirmary, he was taken to the familiar station of Wisteria and Rai. Both Clerics seemed particularly horrified at Fell’s newest barrage of injuries and hurried to start fixing the worst of it, nearly tripping over each others’ runes as their fingers flew through the air.

“He nearly killed you,” Wisteria said grimly.

“What I don’t understand,” Rai interjected, “is how after all of this, you manage to look so pleased with yourself.”

It was true. Fell couldn’t help grinning. In a backwards sort of way, Fell felt he had earned something today.

“Why *do* you look so pleased after nearly getting beaten to death?” Wisteria demanded, fixing Fell with a very pointed look.

Fell gulped. “Because,” he said, scrambling to find the right words, “because today, for the first time, I wasn’t just getting beaten, I was in a fight.”

Rai chuckled. “What, you mean, ‘you should see the other guy’?”

Wisteria rolled her eyes. “Are you telling me you look like this because you *won* a fight?”

Fell looked down, embarrassed. “No, I lost. But I fought back, and some of what I did worked.”

Wisteria sighed. “Well, I suppose that’s good, if it means your fights will be easier now.”

Fell smiled and didn’t bother to correct her. He didn’t expect life at Eastridge to get any easier. If anything, it would get harder. The second-years knew now that he was a threat. No one would be going easy on him.

But Fell knew that as the fights got harder, he would get better. Even now, he tried to take his mind off the pain by going through what Torrent had done and trying to imagine himself doing it.

The other first-years might feel bad for him because he was always fighting Torrent, Rakam, or one of their gang, but Fell also knew it meant he was fighting against the best.

And so, while Fell knew that life was about to get much more painful, he consoled himself with the knowledge that he had improved rapidly—more rapidly than anyone had expected—largely due to the constant sparring with Torrent and Rakam. *If that’s what it takes,* Fell thought as Wisteria’s rune snapped his nose back in place, *then I’m lucky. The only way to be the best is to learn from the best. And I’m going to be the best.*